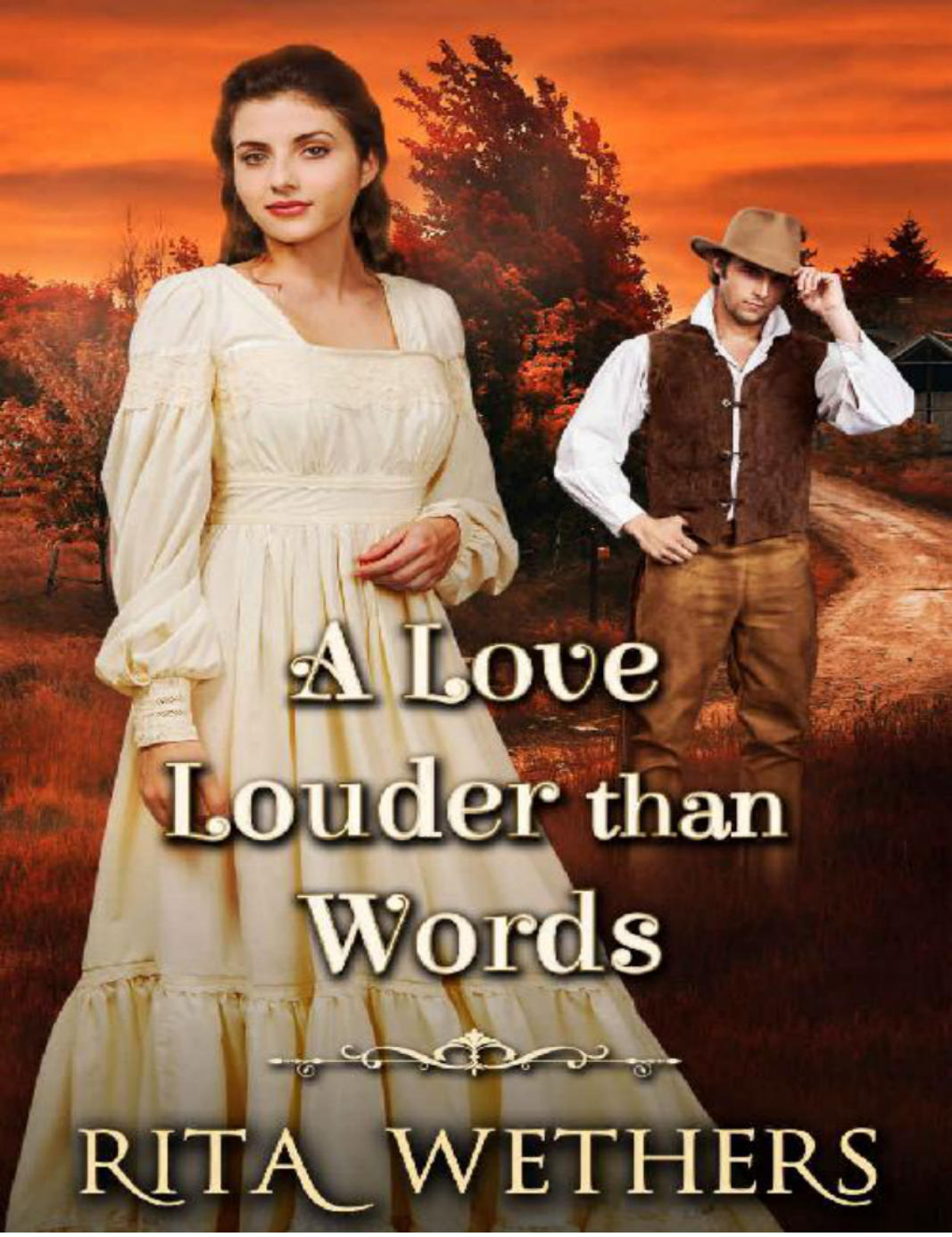

A Love
Louder than
Words
RITA WETHERS

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A Love Louder than Words

Prologue

Summer, 1900

Hunter Springs, AZ

Nathan Carell walked along the property line, staying just hidden behind the row of tall trees that separated the Carell property from the old Grove place next door. The sun was sinking lower on the horizon, and it would soon be dusk; Nathan knew his father was expecting him.

Nathan's chores were finished for the day, but he wasn't quite ready to go inside yet. He walked slowly, dragging his heels and biding his time as he watched the house for signs of movement and made sure he stayed out of sight of his father.

His patience soon paid off. He heard the light footfalls of the young woman he hoped to see. She came down the tree line slowly, basket in hand, looking for mushrooms to harvest.

Not wanting to startle her, Nathan walked a bit more briskly, his

footfalls louder, crushing the dry leaves in his path.

Leona Grove wasn't a bit fooled; she knew Nathan had been waiting for her, it made her smile.

"Now, here's the Big Bad Wolf lyin' in wait for Red Riding Hood," she joked, laughing. She affected a flirty stance, with her basket over one arm and a hand on her petite hips. Nathan could see a sparkle of mischief in her green eyes.

"Oh, the better to pick mushrooms with you, my dear," he replied, gnashing his teeth together with mock fierceness.

The two laughed, sharing lighthearted eye contact and a giggle. Nathan blushed, a little embarrassed. He bent down to harvest mushrooms beside Leona, in an attempt to keep her with him.

"How's Will doing?" he asked.

Leona's older brother Will was closer to Nathan's age and was someone who Nathan admired. Nathan liked Leona better than her

brother Will, even though she was only fourteen and a mere girl, at that. Nathan was only two years older than her.

"He's doing fine. He's been studying real hard lately, so we don't spend as much time together as we used to," Leona said wistfully. She paused, and immediately felt selfish for not asking about Nathan's family. "How are you doing? And how's your father?"

She felt she would be remiss if she didn't inquire about how Nathan and his father were faring since the sudden loss of Nathan's mother a few months prior. Leona knew that his mother died from a devastating illness, although she didn't know the details. Milton Carell, his father, was a reserved, private man, and Nathan wasn't one to talk about his own life too much either. Leona didn't know much about what happened, but she was certain it hit the Carells hard.

A shadow crossed Nathan's face. "We're doing all right, I guess," he responded, unwilling to give voice to the emotional turmoil within him. "Papa's having a rough time without Mama," he said eventually.

Leona nodded sadly. "I can imagine…" Her voice trailed off,

searching for a way to change the subject.

“Oh! Look here!” She bent to fill her basket with the Chanterelle mushrooms she found.

Nathan moved beside her to help put the mushrooms into the basket. He tossed one that bounced out and hit Leona on the cheek.

“Hey! Watch it!” she warned in mock anger, chucking the mushroom back at Nathan.

They both laughed as the mood lightened. They talked and joked as they filled the basket, savoring each other’s company on the warm summer evening.

Nathan was aware that the sun had nearly set, and was about to tell Leona to head for home when he heard his name being bellowed from not too far off. Leona also heard the shout; the voice echoed with anger.

Nathan quickly squeezed Leona’s hand and said, “I have to go.”

Leona didn't reply, she simply smiled at Nathan as he turned to leave. She checked her basket and decided to return home as well.

Nathan scuttled through the trees and made his way towards the house. He dreaded the reception he would get from his father.

Milton Carell stood rigidly at the top of the hill. He had seen Leona leave Nathan to return home. The fact that the two kids were together infuriated him.

As Nathan approached, Milton's fury was given voice: "Get inside now! You missed dinner, lazy, irresponsible boy! You can clean up the dishes," he hissed.

Milton continued to berate him all the way into the house before going into his room and slamming the door. Nathan didn't bother to answer back. He knew his father was angrier about him being with Leona than for being late.

Since Nathan's mother had passed away, his father had been

quick to anger and to weep. Nathan could hear his grief through the walls many a night when he himself couldn't sleep.

The entire valley near Hunter Springs had once belonged solely to the Carell family. The land was prosperous and fertile due to the presence of underground water and an artesian spring that fed the stream. This allowed for year-round water, which, in a region as arid as Arizona, made the land that included the well extremely valuable. The Carells sold the land containing the prosperous well to the Grove family a generation ago. Nathan's grandfather had legally sold the land out of financial hardship when Milton was still a youngster, and ever since, the consensus in the family was that Leona's grandfather had taken advantage of the situation and paid far less than the property was worth.

The grudge stayed within the family as the Groves became more prosperous and the Carells fell further into poverty.

Milton Carell had never lost his anger over the transaction, feeling always that their family had somehow been cheated, and he considered the well stolen from his family.

In the months since his wife's death, Milton had been fixating more and more on the grudge he had with the Grove family over the land.

By sixteen, Nathan had heard so much about the stealing of their family's rights to the well that he'd been working and saving his money planning to buy it back. He wanted to give his father something that had been lost and return the land with the well to the Carell legacy.

Milton had lived with this sense of injustice and carried the grudge his father bequeathed to him and now was passing it to Nathan. Milton sincerely felt that if they were still in possession of the land that the Groves owned, that he may have been able to afford the treatments that his wife needed to cure her illness, and she need not have died.

His anger was tied into his grief over losing his beloved wife, and he set the blame squarely at the feet of the Grove family. The rage built in him as it complicated his grief. It soon became an obsession.

Nathan hoped that Leona, the granddaughter of the Grove patriarch who purchased the well, would be accepted by his father if the issue was no longer disputed; so he'd been socking his money away faithfully, and had amassed a tidy sum. It wouldn't be long before he could make an offer.

Nathan finished cleaning the kitchen, grabbed a chunk of cheese from the sideboard, and went into his room. Reaching into his dresser drawer, he pulled out an enamel box that had belonged to his mother. Inside was the money he'd been saving for two years. He'd hired himself out to do odd jobs: he helped with harvesting on farms in the lowlands, volunteered to do handiwork around the town, and was clerking part-time for a mining office in town.

Hunter Springs was a small community in the Huachuca mountain range of Arizona. The desert that stretched out below the mountains was a hard place to live. Hunter Springs, among other natural springs in the Huachuca created a verdant and fertile soil that made it possible to live and grow things in contrast to the desert below.

In 1882, the town of Tombstone had created a pipeline from the nearest spring down into town for their use. Thus, the town thrived and prospered.

In the desert, water was everything. The Carell and Grove families both understood this, and to their detriment, the Carells sold out their interest in the nearest water. They dug a second well, which was enough to satisfy basic needs, but it never tapped into the generous aquifer that the original well had drilled into.

Nathan sat on his bed and opened the box. He began to count the paper money, planning how he would offer to buy back the land to ease his father's pain.

Nathan had just dumped out the coin to count when he heard the first drops of rain on the roof, quickly followed by a loud clap of thunder. Nathan looked out the window to see another flash of lightning and began to count. At the count of three, the loud boom of the thunder shook the house. He hoped Leona had made it home in time to miss the storm.

These summer storms, known as monsoons, were characterized by torrential rains and often, heat lightning. Nathan was never fond of thunder, but he loved the sound of the rain on the rooftop. He wondered briefly if Milton had remembered to put the livestock into the barn, and quickly put the contents of his box back into the wardrobe.

Nathan went to the door of his father's room and knocked politely to ask if he needed to go out to the barn and close the animals in. There was no answer.

He knocked again and called out, "Papa, are you there?"

Nathan couldn't hear anything over the loud crash of thunder which rattled the windows of their house. He opened the door to his father's bedroom.

It was empty.

Nathan suddenly had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach

as he saw another flash of lightning out the window.

He shrugged on his oilskin rain jacket as he went out the door and ran down the hill to the barn. The sheep were inside their stalls, dry and comfortable, and the door to the barn had indeed been closed.

Nathan sighed with relief and checked the cow quickly. She had a small calf curled up in the straw in the corner of the stall. Elsie, her mother, was mooing and pacing, agitated from the thunder.

Nathan closed the doors to the barn as he left. Another flash of lightning, then immediately a clap of thunder rolled over the top of his home.

The next flash hit a tree on the property line. Nathan could smell the ozone in the air and then stopped short as his attention was taken by the sight of flames coming from next door.

The Grove house is on fire!

Nathan headed for the neighboring property at a run, calling for

his father, heedless of the storm. Lightning continued to flash, and the thunder rolled down the mountain. The rain was easing as he made his way to the Grove home to see it already fully engulfed in flames.

Leona! Nathan's mind raced, and he prayed they had gotten out of the burning house.

Suddenly, he was tackled sideways by a blunt force, and he hit the ground so hard that it knocked the wind out of his lungs. After a moment, Nathan came to, and realized it was his father, Milton.

"Papa! Leona, Will, and their parents!" Nathan struggled to free himself. "Let me go!" he cried out.

"Son! Help is on the way. I've just lost your mother, I can't lose you, too!" Milton was yelling as he kept a tight grip on his son. "The house was struck by lightning, it's no use, son. It's a goner."

Nathan squirmed as his father held him. Neighbors from the surrounding homesteads had gathered. At first, to try to extinguish the fire, the rain having abated, and the monsoon having moved on down

the mountain. Then, when it became apparent that the house was lost to the flames, they began to look for survivors.

It took no time at all for the Grove house to burn to cinders. In the arid landscape, the house burst into flames, and crumbled to the ground, in a matter of moments.

The rain was now a light shower, but there was really nothing left to burn. Once the roof fell in, the fire burned itself out.

The Groves' neighbors used axes and shovels to put out the rest of the embers and made the grisly discovery that the Groves' burnt remains were there in the rubble.

Nathan broke free from his father's hold and ran to ask the men coming out of the charred remnants of the Grove house if they had found the children.

"Leona and Will! Did you find them?" Nathan was in fear of what he'd hear. His friends' parents were confirmed dead, where were the children?

Mr. Robertson, a burly man of Nordic descent came out of the house, his shirtsleeves and his face smudged with soot. He was coughing from the smoke. It had almost stopped raining.

Nathan ran to him. “Did you see the children? Were Will and Leona in the house?” He was beside himself with worry.

Mr. Robertson tousled Nathan’s hair and laid a large hand upon his shoulder.

“No son, I’m sorry. No sign of the children.” Mr. Robertson sighed and shook his head. “No sign of life.”

He walked over and sat down heavily on a nearby bench. Putting his head in his hands, he bent under the weight of what he’d just witnessed, shutting his eyes against the image of the Groves lying dead.

Nathan could scarcely take in the idea that his friends were gone. He fell to his knees and crumpled in grief. Tears mixed with rain, soot

and ash made streaks down his face, but he didn't notice, nor try to wipe them away.

Chapter 1

1906

Akron, Ohio

Leona Grove stood still as a statue on the sidewalk in front of the post office. Her eyes flashed with anger and her pretty mouth was set in a grim line.

A young man around her own age waved a letter in her face, taunting her.

“Can I read this?” He dodged away as Leona reached for the letter.

“What’s wrong, pretty lady? Cat got your tongue?”

The young man laughed as anger rose in Leona. He continued to dance around Leona in glee at her discomfort. She reached out again for the letter. He laughed as she missed her mark.

“You’re not saying no, so I guess that means yes!” he growled.

He began to open the letter, then as Leona reached for it, he took hold of her arm. She flinched and tried to twist out of his grasp. He pulled her close to him. She could smell the male smell of him and the tobacco on his breath. “How about a kiss?” he said, leering down at her.

Leona struggled to get away, but the vise-like grip of the young man’s hand tightened against her wrist.

Leona relaxed for a moment as he pulled her in, appearing to give in to him. Then, with all her might, grabbed for the letter and threw the man off balance, just in time to get away.

She stepped backwards and the man lunged after her, just as her brother Will rounded the corner and saw what had transpired.

“Just what do you think you’re doing?” Will thundered. “Take your hands off my sister and get out of here, before I drive you out

myself. I'm a lawyer, and I can make sure you are thrown behind bars and never see the light of day again! Test me if you think I'm joking!"

Will's anger was evident in his expression and tone. The young man took his threat seriously.

"No need for that, sir. I was just having a little bit of fun with the pretty lady," he stuttered, nervously stepping away from Will.

"There is no fun to be had at my sister's expense. You'd best remember that," Will growled.

In two steps the younger man was at the street corner fleeing the scene as quickly as he could.

Will turned back to Leona. "Are you all right? Did he hurt you? If he did, so help me–"

Leona shook her head and indicated with gestures that she was scared but unhurt.

Will bent down to pick up the letter the man had dropped. He looked at the postmark on the envelope. “Hunter Springs? Who’s writing you from home?”

Leona snatched the letter from her brother’s grasp and turned away. Will continued to question Leona and she told him nothing about the writer of the letters, keeping them pressed to her chest as they walked the two blocks to their lodging house.

Bystanders on the street witnessed the exchange between Leona and her brother. The hand gestures they had exchanged were puzzling. The siblings seemed to have a language of their own. Not one person in town had ever heard Leona speak. They knew she was not deaf, because her brother spoke plainly to her, and she responded. She had no vision impairment, no hearing impairment, and no visible sign of a vocal impairment. She simply did not speak.

What they could not have known was that, ever since the tragic fire that had killed their parents, Leona had lost her voice and nearly all power of speech.

Now at twenty years of age, her beauty was beyond compare and she attracted attention wherever she went. As lovely and fragile as a petite flower, with her rosy cheeks and lips, young Leona stood out among the matrons and careworn women of Akron like a rose among weeds. And, like a flower, she graced the world silently.

Will had never worried too much about his sister being on the street alone on a trip to the store or to the post office to pick up their mail. Akron was a respectable town. Civilized, even–or so they thought.

That was, until the day she was accosted by that young man. Will Grove quickly realized that his sister Leona was vulnerable to the world, and vowed to either hire a companion for her, or to keep her safely inside unless he was available to accompany her out in public.

When the house burned down six years ago, Will and Leona had fled to a friend of the family in Tombstone.

They had taken Leona to several doctors in Arizona but found no one who could unlock the mystery of her muteness. It was eventually

attributed to the trauma of the fire.

That left Will with a difficult choice: he could be a caretaker for his sister or commit her to a psychiatric hospital where she could be cared for.

He was her only kin, and as the eldest male and only surviving member of the family, Leona was his responsibility.

Will loved his sister and wanted to do the right thing for her. He knew she didn't belong in an asylum, which, in spite of the highbrow names psychiatric hospitals were given, was exactly what they were: asylums for the insane.

Will knew his sister wasn't ill or dangerous, but in a deep state of shock from the trauma of the fire, which had burned her arm significantly, and left many unseen scars. She didn't need a hospital, she needed time to heal. While the burns she'd sustained the night of the fire healed, her spirit never truly did.

They'd spent six years away from Hunter Springs, and Leona had

come out of her shell a bit. She seemed happy sometimes, but the rest of the time she sunk into a state of melancholia that Will could do little to bring her out of.

He knew that her inability to speak would be a hindrance to her in all social situations. She was unable to go to school, so she'd finished her studies on her own. Try as he might, Will couldn't imagine anyone would be interested in Leona as a wife, in spite of her great beauty.

Will was desperate to help his sister. As a clerk in a law office, he had access to a great deal of information. He found a school for the deaf that taught an innovative kind of sign language that had been developed for teaching deaf individuals how to communicate without speech.

Once the legalities of their parents' death had been sorted out, the siblings left Arizona to settle in Ohio where a school for the deaf had been founded in the late 1880s.

Will met with the headmistress, explaining that, while Leona was

not deaf, she could surely benefit from learning sign language, as she was what they termed “selectively mute” as the result of the tragedy she’d endured.

The headmistress was not unsympathetic and allowed Leona and Will to come twice a week in the evenings to be taught American Sign Language. Leona was quick to pick up the nuances of the language, as she had already been communicating without words for months. Will had a bit of a harder time learning it, as he was speech-oriented, being an attorney and all.

During the week, Will worked at a prominent law firm in Akron. He had finished his law studies and was apprenticed there. Leona had found employment after she’d completed her schooling, helping the boarding house owner, a widow from Cincinnati, keep the house in exchange for a reduction in their rental fees.

The two women had become fast friends. Leona looked upon Mrs. Applegate as a maternal figure, and the feeling was mutual. Mrs. Applegate’s children were grown and lived in New York. They rarely visited.

Mrs. Applegate had recognized the need for a maternal presence upon meeting Leona. Her heart went out to the young girl when Will explained the tragedy that had befallen them and the unusual manifestation of Leona's grief. They bonded immediately and had become quite close over the course of the past five years. Mrs. Applegate–Katie, as she was known–truly looked upon Leona as a daughter.

When the siblings arrived at the front door of the boarding house, Will's mind was once again focused on the present, yet he still raised an eyebrow as Leona put out her hand to stop Will before he opened the door.

He turned to her with questioning eyes. She handed over the letter she had just received. She had thought about it on her way home and decided since the question of her being a mail-order bride was nearly settled, it was time to let Will in on her secret.

Will took the letter and scanned it quickly. Words popped out at him from the page: "*Sheriff*, *bride*, *advertisement*, *journey to Arizona*…?"

Will's eyes got bigger and he looked up at her incredulously. "Mail-order bride?" he asked.

Leona smiled and nodded.

"Are you truly out of your mind?" Will asked, incredulous. He couldn't wrap his head around what he was reading, and how quickly this all seemed to fall on him.

Leona scowled at him, shaking her head decisively.

She handed him the rest of the stack of letters she'd been carrying and pointed out paragraphs where the sheriff in Hunter Springs had written descriptions of his life and work, his likes and dislikes, and his desire to bring Leona to Hunter Springs as his bride.

"Ridiculous!" Will responded, outraged. "Anyone can say they're a good person, that doesn't make it true."

Leona huffed and took the letters back. She opened the door to the boarding house and went inside without responding.

When they reached their rooms and had closed the door behind them, Will confronted Leona again. “Do you really want to do this? Are you sure?” he asked in a hushed, concerned tone this time.

Will was still in shock from learning that his sister had been corresponding with a strange man.

“What were you thinking? Were you just going to go off and leave me without saying anything?”

Will stopped short, realizing what he’d said. “I’m sorry, I just can’t believe you’d up and leave me like this.”

Leona rolled her eyes and shook her head.

She signed to him, “*No, I would have told you*.”

“If you think I’m going to let you go back to Arizona alone, you’ve got another thing coming.” Will was adamant.

Leona looked surprised. She signed to him, "*Will you come with me?*"

"Is this really what you want? To marry this sheriff?" Will asked her. He was still in disbelief that his sweet and silent sister had taken a huge, life-changing step without consulting him. After all, he was responsible for her, and his life completely revolved around hers.

Leona laughed soundlessly. She nodded emphatically.

"*Yes,*" she signed.

"Well, I guess we're going back home then. Write to your sheriff that I have some loose ends to tie up with my work. I'll have to take care of some legal cases I'm working on. It might take two to three weeks. We can let him know by telegraph when we get our train tickets."

Leona smiled and nodded. She crossed the room to where her brother was standing and threw her arms around him, kissing him on the cheek.

"*Thank you*," she gestured to him, squeezing him tightly.

Will held her close to him for a moment, and dropped a kiss on the top of her head. Then he tickled her, and she playfully dodged his next grab and punched him in the arm as they'd done when they were children. He made an exaggerated mock pain face, then they both laughed.

After another moment Will's demeanor turned serious. "I wonder what home is like now," he mused. He hadn't thought about Hunter Springs in a while, and thinking of it now brought a cascade of images with emotions attached to them, flowing like a waterfall through his memory.

Leona's face fell. She clearly was experiencing the same type of emotional overload. Will threw his arm around her shoulder, steering her towards the sitting room.

"It's going to be a bit sad for both of us, I know, but I think I'm ready to go back. You seem to be too. I'm not happy about having to

go to the homestead; but, since we still have the land, at least I have somewhere to go," he reasoned.

"We've got enough money to build another house and to set you up with your wedding trousseau. We'd best get Mrs. Applegate to go shopping with us in Cleveland next week. We can have the merchandise sent ahead of us to Hunter Springs. I don't have the slightest idea about what a bride needs. You're definitely better off with Miss Katie," he admitted. "I'll speak with her tomorrow."

Leona's eyes shone; the excitement that she felt was contagious.

"Honestly, sis, I hope you'll be very happy." Will looked at his sister fondly. "That's all I've ever wanted for you. You're all I've got, you know." He was getting emotional.

"I think you probably want to write to him today, don't you?" Will asked, adding, "Let me put a note of my own welcoming him to the family, before you seal the envelope. I'll let him know I approve of the match and will be accompanying you out to Arizona. That should ease his mind somewhat."

Leona smiled and squeezed her eyes shut tightly as an errant tear made its way down her cheek. She loved her brother very much and was so happy that he'd be traveling back home with her. She wanted his approval and moral support. She expected that returning home to the scene of her family tragedy would be upsetting for both of them, but, as Will had said, being away from Hunter Springs had given them time and distance with which to process their grief.

Leona wasn't really sure if she was ready to go back home to Arizona, but she knew she would soon find out. She hoped Will was right and that they were both ready to go home again. There were many unknown things ahead, and Leona was just happy that she was going to have her brother by her side.

Chapter 2

1906

Hunter Springs, AZ

Nathan Carell and Sheriff John Murray sat in the sheriff's office playing cards. A bottle of whiskey sat between them. The men laughed and joked together as Sheriff Murray played his hand. Nathan had gone to the sheriff's office after work, as he often did, to shoot the breeze, have a drink, and unwind before heading home to his intractable father.

John Murray placed a plate with sandwiches within reach and invited Nathan to have one.

"Susan sent these over earlier. She always feeds the prisoners, and since I'm held prisoner tonight waiting for Deputy Rogers to return, she thought she'd feed me, too."

"Tell your sister thank you." Nathan nodded and helped himself

to a sandwich. “I’m starving!”

“If you had a wife, my sister wouldn’t have to feed you. I think it’s time you placed an ad for a bride, Nathan. You’re certainly not going to find one in Hunter Springs.”

Nathan laughed. “Oh my father would love that! If I had a wife, I wouldn’t be coming here to play cards and drink your whiskey,” he replied, laughing.

“I’ll think about it. What’s the news from your lady love?”

Sheriff Murray smiled, thinking of the news he’d received just yesterday.

“She’s finally agreed to come out here. She’s everything I’ve ever wanted, Nathan. After all the months of letter writing, she’s finally going to be here.” Murray fairly bubbled with excitement.

“What’s that going to mean for your sister? Two women in the same house doesn’t sound like a great idea to me.” Nathan looked at

John with amusement. “I can see it now…” he pondered with bemusement.

“Susan’s going to stay with us up until the wedding; she’s taken a position with a family down in Tombstone. She’s going to be the governess for one of the families that own the Tough Nut silver mine,” John said proudly.

“It’s a fine house and there are only two children as of now. The mistress is expecting soon, so they really need the help. They have a maid, so she’s only going to have to take care of the children.” John got serious and changed the subject.

He looked intensely at Nathan.

“You’re going to stand up with me, aren’t you?” he asked. “I’m going to need a best man at my wedding.”

Nathan was flattered and immediately agreed.

“Of course I will! You’re my closest friend.”

“Well, that’s settled now,” Murray said smugly. He continued, “How is the job going? I heard old man Randall was thinking of promoting you.”

Nathan nodded, sipping his whiskey, and playing his hand.

“He’s getting ready to retire, so his son Alan is moving up into the management role, and I’ll be promoted into his vacant position.

“It will be nice to be a partner, and not a clerk. It means more money too. I grew up pretty poor, and I am enjoying having some savings now. I’ll take one card.”

Nathan had been working for one of the mining concerns in the area for the past eight years. He started as a junior clerk working part-time, then worked his way up. His outstanding work ethic and innate business sense made a favorable impression on the owners of the company. He worked hard and was offered a full-time position there five years ago.

“Papa told me yesterday that I’m going to be on my own for the next month or so. He’s got to travel to Nevada to our cousin’s home. Cousin Agnes isn’t doing too well, she’s getting on in years and her health is failing. I guess they were pretty close when they were younger. Pa says that there are some family heirlooms that she wants to pass along and see him one last time.”

Nathan stretched and said, “Call.”

The two men laid down their cards. Murray won the hand with three queens and picked up the money on the table.

“Your deal.”

Nathan shuffled the deck and put it back on the table. John Murray took a sip of whiskey, cut the cards, and handed them to Nathan, who dealt the next hand out.

“I’m looking forward to having the place to myself for a month. Papa has gotten worse, I think. He’s not easy to live with, and he’s always there,” Nathan admitted, putting his money down.

“I, for one, am glad he’s not going to be here. He might scare my sweet bride away! I’ll take three,” Sheriff Murray joked, but he was half-serious.

Nathan dealt three cards to his friend and took two for himself.

“Papa’s a handful, to be sure,” he agreed.

Milton Carell was a grumpy and bitter old man, and the less they saw of him, the better Milton liked it. That old man-made life hell for his son and was a problem for anyone in town who had any kind of business dealings with him. He carried with him an aura of anger and self-loathing and had taken to drink in recent years.

Nathan did his best to be a dutiful son, but he, too, felt that since his mother died, his father had become more and more unpleasant. He was difficult to live with.

Even though Nathan could afford to take a place in town, he stayed at the homestead on the mountain. He felt his mother would

have wanted him to take care of his father, and to continue to live on and work the land that was his inheritance and legacy.

Nathan, for his part, was glad they'd stopped breeding livestock. He wasn't relishing the idea of having to care for sheep and pigs in addition to his job at the mining office. Milton had sold off their milk cow and all the small livestock over the past few years. He didn't want to do the chores associated with caring for the animals, and since Nathan had gone to work full-time in town, he no longer could rely on his son to take care of the farm. With the animals gone, Nathan only had to gather some eggs and tend to the chickens and the dog which freed him to work late at the office when needed.

He often stayed at the office after business hours. He liked working in the quiet and he found any excuse to stay longer in the evenings to avoid his father.

"I'll bet three dollars," John bet first.

"I'll see you and raise a dollar," Nathan answered and laid his money down.

“Call.”

Sheriff Murray and Nathan both laid down their cards.

Nathan had a full house, and the sheriff, two pairs.

“You win again!” Murray laughed as Nathan gathered the cards for the next hand, moping over the loss.

There was no true competition between them, it was always a friendly game. They bet low stakes and played to pass the time.

“Now then, let’s talk about a bride for you, young man,” Sheriff Murray said with mock seriousness as he dealt the next hand.

Nathan passed his turn. “What do you say if we wager on this hand?”

Murray took another sip of whiskey and drew two cards.

“If I win this hand, you will place your advertisement in the regional newspaper for a mail-order bride. What do you say? Are you game?” Sheriff Murray teased Nathan. Murray was teasing, but he truly wanted his friend to find love and have a wife. He wanted his friend to find and share the same happiness that he was feeling with his own bride-to-be. Murray also knew that after old Milton passed away that Nathan would be lonely on his own in the cabin on the mountain.

“You’re on! It’s a wager!” Nathan agreed, looking at the royal flush he held in his hand. He felt he couldn’t lose. He made a substantial bet.

John Murray laughed. “You’re feeling pretty confident, aren’t you?”

Nathan kept his cards close to his chest—literally. “I think so,” he said. He knew he had a winning hand.

The next turn, Murray called. When they laid down their cards, he groaned out loud. Nathan smirked.

“No wonder you agreed, you couldn’t lose!” John said with no small amount of chagrin.

“Well, that’s settled. I guess you’ll be the lone bachelor now.”

Nathan chuckled, and thought for a second. “It’s fine, John. You know, I lost my heart a long time ago, and I’ve never really wanted to be with anyone since. I don’t know if I ever will,” he said wistfully.

The sheriff finished his glass of whiskey and began to gather the cards.

“Another hand?” He corked the bottle and set it aside, looking at Nathan expectantly.

“No, I think I’d better head for home now. I need to help my father get packed and ready to leave. He’s got to catch the train tomorrow afternoon in Tombstone. He might need help getting everything ready. He gets a little unsteady on his feet when he gets tired, and it’s going to be late by the time I get home.”

Nathan finished his own drink and stood up. He gathered his money and reached for his hat.

“Thanks for the game, John. I’m sure looking forward to meeting your new bride.”

Nathan clapped his hand on Murray’s shoulder as he walked by. The sheriff stood and escorted him to the door, to lock it behind him.

“She’ll be on the train to Tombstone in ten days,” Sheriff Murray said. “I hope you’ll be there to meet her with me.”

“I wouldn’t miss it,” Nathan replied sincerely. He was truly happy for his friend.

“I sure hope she’s everything you think she will be; I know it doesn’t always work out that way,” Nathan said.

“I have a very good feeling about this sweet lady, Nathan. I have read and re-read her letters. I can see nothing worrisome, or anything

at all that gives me cause for concern. I think she's about as perfect as a woman can be," John smiled happily.

"Goodnight, then."

Nathan donned his hat and left the sheriff's office. He had a warm glow from the whiskey and was feeling a bit nostalgic. He began the walk home feeling wistful, but that feeling soon turned to longing and remembrance…

The love of his life, the one who'd won his heart, had not been seen since the tragic day her parents were killed in that awful fire. Leona and her brother Will disappeared from Hunter Springs, and no one knew where they were.

Nathan often thought about Leona. He wondered how they got away from the burning house, and where they had gone. In the weeks and months that followed the fire, Nathan had asked everyone he met in town if they had news of the siblings. As gossip is always spread and comes back around, he learned two years later that Leona and Will had indeed escaped the blaze, and Hunter Springs, and had

headed out East. No one knew where.

The property next door had fallen to ruin. The barn roof sagged and the much disputed well went unused. Nathan had inquired about purchasing the property, but an exhaustive search indicated that it was still owned by William Grove, and a letter of inquiry sent via his agent, had been returned unopened.

Nathan still hoped to reunite the property before his father passed away. He was more than tired of hearing about how the land was stolen from their family, and how it now sat unused.

It was a shame that all of the abundant water available was left lying dormant right next door. It was a deeper shame, in Nathan's mind, that the Grove children had lost their parents at the whim of a lightning strike and had been forced to flee.

Nathan often fantasized about where they were and what Leona looked like now, where she lived and what she did with her days. He figured she had probably married already, since she would be twenty now, and ladies of that age were already considered spinsters or "old

maids.”

A strange anger began to fill his heart. He wanted to be the one to marry Leona, and it was beyond irksome that some other man had been able to woo and win her, when Nathan, himself, had not had the opportunity.

He thought of Leona now with longing and stopped along the road home. It was a clear night; the stars appeared close enough to touch. It reminded him of a girl whose green eyes carried starlight in them, all those years ago.

Nathan leaned against a tree on the side of the road and watched the sky, recalling the perfect pink of her lips and the roses in her cheeks. He thought about John Murray’s suggestion that he place an advertisement in the personals for a mail-order bride.

The longing in him made him consider the idea seriously, but the memory of Leona, the only girl he’d loved, still held him captive.

He couldn’t dream of being with anyone other than her. He

supposed he was a romantic, but the memory of the time they'd spent together and the feeling of loss and longing that consumed him whenever he thought of her told him that the love he bore, even after so much time had passed, had been true.

Nathan laughed a little to himself. Starlight and whiskey made for a heady combination on such a beautiful night. He shook his head and resumed his walk towards home.

Chapter 3

Leona and Will disembarked from the train in Tombstone. The hot dusty air felt familiar and a great contrast to the climate of Ohio. They'd enjoyed the trip across the states; however, by the fourth day, they were getting excited and anxious to be at their destination. They still thought of Hunter Springs as home, even as they had some worry and sadness about returning to the scene of their family tragedy.

Will scanned the small group of people who'd assembled to meet the train, many looking tired and wilted in the afternoon heat. He handed his sister off the locomotive onto the platform and escorted her to a shady bench next to the depot. He could see distress on her face as she looked around for her intended in the crowd.

"I'll get our baggage, stay here," Will directed her as she was seated. He returned to the train car. Leona looked expectantly at each man that approached her position, and registered disappointment as they continued by. Nearly ten minutes had passed, the large clock on the train station wall showed, before Will returned with their luggage.

"No one yet?" he asked her. Leona shook her head with a

bewildered look.

“I’ll check inside for a message,” Will said and entered the depot. He returned moments later with a stern look on his face.

“Perhaps Sheriff Murray didn’t receive the telegraph about our arrival time. Obviously, there’s been some mix-up in communication.”

Leona nodded, her eyes downcast. He could see that after all the excitement and anticipation of meeting her husband-to-be, that she was quite disappointed that he’d failed to materialize at the train depot.

“I’m sure there’s a logical explanation, sis. Don’t worry. We’ll just hire a buggy to get us up the mountain. Shall we get some lunch first? I’m hungry, and you look like you could use a cold drink. We can spare an hour to rest and eat before we leave.”

Leona nodded and rose. Picking up their luggage, they walked to the livery stable three blocks away and planned for a horse and buggy to take them to Hunter Springs. They left their belongings with the

office there and paid for the rental. With that taken care of, they walked back to where they'd seen a sign for a cafe up the block.

The inside of the cafe was cooler than outside, and Leona felt better after eating a cold sandwich and drinking two glasses of iced tea. Will devoured his lunch and three glasses of cold lemonade. They settled their bill and went to get the buggy. The sun was still high when they left Tombstone for the ride up to Hunter Springs.

The road to the Huachuca Mountains was well-traveled, with Tombstone being the nearest large city in the area.

Hunter Springs sat at the top of a foothill canyon that gained in elevation. Leona and Will could feel the change in the air as they began to climb up out of the desert floor.

Leona sighed, breathing the cooler air and wiped her face with her handkerchief. She adjusted her bonnet, tucking in the wild tendrils that threatened to escape in the mountain breeze.

"Are you worried about your sheriff not liking the way you

look?"

She nodded; Will chuckled.

"He knows you've been on a train for nearly a week," Will reminded her with a wink.

"Even travel-worn, you make a pretty enough picture, sis." Will jostled Leona with his elbow and laughed.

Leona shrugged and signed to him: "*Thank you. I want to see him.*"

Will nodded his acknowledgement and said nothing more. He was busy taking in the sights and enjoying the feeling of the cool mountain air.

He was excited and a little apprehensive about returning to Hunter Springs. He was also anxious to investigate this sheriff a bit before he turned his sister over to be married to him. Back in Ohio, he'd sent some letters of inquiry, but had learned little about John

Murray and his background. He wanted to find out everything he could about him and planned to do some investigating in Hunter Springs.

He also wanted to find out why the sheriff had not met the train, nor sent anyone to meet them. That seemed odd to Will, but perhaps it was just a miscommunication. He was willing to give the sheriff the benefit of the doubt; but he was withholding judgment until he met the man.

As they entered the outskirts of the town of Hunter Springs, they felt a familiarity mixed with a disoriented feeling. As they made their way past what used to be the edge of town, Leona began pointing out houses and homesteads with fences and gates that had not existed when they were last in Hunter Springs.

The town itself had grown slightly, with more streets added on the western end of town. Hunter Springs itself was more like a bona fide small city, and not the village hamlet it had been in nineteen hundred.

“Things can sure change in six years, can’t they?” Will remarked. “I don’t know if this is the right street or not.”

Leona nodded and pointed to the street they needed to turn on to get to the livery stable. They had made arrangements to return the rental buggy in Hunter Springs.

They left their luggage with the buggy and arranged to have their belongings picked up later the next day. Will needed to secure a room for temporary lodging. He’d written to the boarding house owner in Hunter Springs but they had left Akron before he received a reply.

They walked back towards the main street of town in the direction of the sheriff’s office.

“I sure hope this man of yours has a good explanation as to why he didn’t meet our train,” Will said sternly.

Leona nodded; she was puzzled as well. John had received all of her previous letters, so she had been certain that he had received the

news of their expected arrival. She looked at her brother and shrugged in resignation. She hoped they would soon have answers.

Will looked up as they reached the corner of the main street. He felt a tug on his shirt sleeve. Leona was smiling in recognition.

“Yes,” Will answered. “I know where we are now.”

Leona nodded and gestured to the right. “The sheriff’s office is this way.”

Will replied, “Just across the street, there.” Leona took his arm and they proceeded to cross the wide street.

Suddenly they were aware of the sound and feeling of pounding hooves. Horses in a cloud of dust had rounded the bend and were bearing down on them.

Leona froze in terror. She couldn’t make out the riders’ faces as they approached. The men had bandanas over their faces and hats with brims pulled low to shield their eyes.

Bandits!

Leona soon realized the danger they were in standing in the middle of the way, but try as she might, she couldn't make her feet move.

Will pulled on her arm. "Leona! Come on!" He felt like he was pulling a lead weight, as if she were rooted to the spot.

Leona looked at Will with pleading in her eyes. He made as if to pick her up, as another dust cloud filled with horses advanced from the opposite end of the street. The afternoon sun glinted off the sheriff's badge as the man approached on horseback.

There was the report of a pistol and an answer from the sheriff's deputies. Leona and Will were positioned in the exact spot to be caught in the crossfire.

As Will reached down to pick Leona up to carry her to safety, the sheriff's horse was suddenly in front of them. He placed his horse to

shield them and yelled, “Get over behind that building!”

He jumped off his horse and stayed between them and the bandits, firing his gun until Will was able to carry Leona to safety. They ducked down behind the wall in an alley on the opposite side of the street.

Leona snapped out of her daze as she realized that the man who had saved them, that stood before them under a hail of gunfire, was John Murray, her husband-to-be.

“Stay here!” Murray ordered, as he turned to remount his horse. He had not recognized whom he had just saved.

As he stepped in the stirrup to mount the big bay horse, more shots rang out. One of them cruelly found its mark. Sheriff John Murray fell back to the ground, with a groan and cry of pain. His horse, frightened by the sounds and the fall jumped sideways and ran off down the street away from the noise.

Leona let loose a silent scream, shaking from head to toe as she

and Will pulled John Murray back into the relative safety of the alley.

"Keep your head down," Will warned. The battle between the bandits and the lawmen was still being fought in the street. Will ducked down and peered around the corner of the building. It seemed that the lawmen had the bandits on the run. They appeared to have turned and were fleeing, the sheriff's posse hot on their heels.

Leona fell to her knees beside the semi-conscious sheriff. Her tears fell like rain as she put pressure on the wound to try to stop the man's life-force from bleeding out.

"Press hard on the wound, Leona," Will instructed her. "Use the heel of your hand and then press down hard with your other hand on top. I'll be right here."

Will heard the sounds of the gun fight moving eastward out of town. He took another cautious look around the corner. It appeared safe enough. He ran into the street and saw the dust cloud retreating. He called for help.

“The sheriff’s been shot! Somebody please, get a doctor!”

There was no reply. He ducked back down the alley to where the still and prone figure of John Murray lay, and told his sister,

“I’m going to get help. Stay with him and keep that pressure on.”

Leona nodded; the tears and pain in her eyes cut Will to the core.

He yelled for a doctor again with no response, so he ran towards the center of town to find help for the wounded man.

Leona tried to find her voice to no avail. She had so many things she wanted to say to her intended. She had kept all of his letters but had not answered every question he’d written to her in the interest of them having topics to converse about when they finally met in person. Sadly, she feared they would never have the chance.

She prayed he would survive.

She tried to speak but could not. All she could do now was weep

and try to stem the flow of blood that was steadily diminishing her fiancé's chances.

His eyelids fluttered and she willed him to open his eyes. She wanted to let him know she was with him, that she would always be with him. Her breathing was ragged with sobs and the horror of what had happened. She locked her spirit down inside of her and simply knelt there, pressing her hands to the wound in her intended's chest.

It wasn't until she heard her name spoken loudly in her left ear that she registered that there was a man kneeling beside her. His large hand removed hers and placed a piece of fabric onto the wound.

Leona was fixated on the blood that covered John Murray's chest. It had oozed out over her hands as well. They felt hot and sticky. She scrubbed them on the front of her skirt, but that did little more than smear onto her dress. There was so much blood on her hands, she felt she may never be able to get them clean. She heard her name again and it pulled her focus away from the blood. She thought she recognized the voice but couldn't be sure, she couldn't quite place it.

“Leona? Le—Leona, is that you?”

Nathan couldn’t believe his eyes. He barely recognized the woman who was before him, but she bore a striking resemblance to his childhood love.

No, it can’t be.

No matter who this woman was, he didn’t like the way she looked, kind of scared and hurt.

Leona was stunned, frozen. She almost couldn’t believe her own eyes. *Was that truly Nathan?*

She didn’t recognize him at first. The second time he said his name her head came up and she met his eyes. There was shock and terror in those beautiful green eyes he remembered, then the light of recognition.

Leona’s eyes darted from Nathan’s face to the pale and still

countenance of her husband-to-be. Her face fell as she heard John Murray take two gurgling liquid breaths. Blood trickled out of the corner of his mouth. His body bucked under the weight of Nathan's as his friend tried in vain to stop the bleeding.

John mumbled something. Nathan struggled to make out what he was saying.

"My girl–" he gasped. "Nathan, take care of my bride."

There was no time, or room for false promises of recovery.

"I will. You can go in peace."

Nathan had seen enough of life to know that there was no recovering from a gunshot straight through the heart. He was sure that this was the end for John Murray. He hoped his friend could hear him. He prayed he wasn't in pain.

Leona gasped along with John as he fought to hang on to the slim thread of life. She embraced and held him as he exhaled his last

breath, her body shaking like an aspen leaf in the wind as she saw her future life and happiness die right then, cradled in her arms.

She heard Nathan's soft voice saying, "Oh John, no."

A strangled sob leapt from him, and he began to weep unashamedly for the loss of his closest friend. Leona choked back tears herself, completely disbelieving of this horrible arrival.

Chapter 4

Nathan had just been locking up and preparing to leave his office when he heard the commotion in the street. He'd been expecting a showdown sometime today between the lawmen and the gang of thieves that were trying to shoot up the town.

There had been a buzz of gossip through the town earlier that day about the bandits approaching. One of John Murray's deputies had brought Nathan a message stating that they would not be able to get out of town to go meet the train in Tombstone.

Sadly, John's bride would be on her own with her brother and they would have to find their way to Hunter Springs. He couldn't leave town and advised Nathan to stay where he was as well. The danger of being ambushed by the desperate band of thieves was too great.

Nathan worked for a prominent mining company in town that was affiliated with a large silver mine. It was reasonable to assume that his office might be an intended target for the bandits. Before Nathan left the office of his employer, he made sure to place all of the

valuable items into the safe and to lock up the office securely. If the thieves tried to rob his employers, he wasn't going to make it easy for them. The safe and silver within it wouldn't be an easy target. Not if he could help it.

Nathan knew that if Sheriff Murray said it was too dangerous, that a conflict was imminent. John Murray put his job as the sheriff and protector of the people of Hunter Springs above his own personal desires and safety.

Nathan felt badly for his friend. He knew that John had been anticipating the arrival of his bride-to-be for weeks now and when the day had finally arrived, he wouldn't be able to meet her train. Nathan knew he would be bitterly disappointed, but he also knew that John Murray would always put his job ahead of his personal life. It was just the way of a lawman. The job was his life.

When John Murray came to Hunter Springs from Yuma, bringing his spinster sister along to keep house for him, he made the commitment to uphold the law and lay down his own life, if need be.

Hunter Springs was not an uncivilized little hamlet: the folks that resided there were mostly upstanding and hardworking people. There was the occasional drunken fight or domestic dispute, but for the most part, Hunter Springs was a peaceful and pleasant town.

The news of thieves due to arrive that afternoon was shocking. All they knew was that the gang had made its way through several other towns, including Tombstone, and were fleeing in the direction of the Huachuca Mountains, where there were ample places to hide in the canyons.

Nathan was already on the street when the shooting started. He was rounding a corner when he saw his friend and the deputies ahorse, riding and shooting. The melee advanced through the street and Nathan took a chance to advance and run forward to try and get to the sheriff's office to await his return.

He made it half a block when he saw John Murray wheel his horse away from the deputies and come back towards two people who were standing frozen in the street. He watched as the man picked up the small woman and the three of them ducked back into the alley.

John's horse was still visible. Nathan heard the sound of a bullet whiz by his head; he was safe in his position and thought it prudent to remain where he was. He crouched down behind a stack of feed sacks near the dry goods store entrance. It was a safe vantage point from which to watch the conflict.

He heard another shot and a strangled cry. He looked up just in time to see his friend fall. The two people he had saved pulled him back down into the alley, and he could not see anything else.

As the deputies got the bandits to turn and run, one fell from his horse, and the others fled out of town. He saw the young man run back into the street calling for a doctor. He knew John must have been badly hurt.

Nathan saw his chance as the gunfight turned into a chase and made a break for it.

He ran with all his might and came around the end of the building to see John Murray lying in the dirt on his back with the young woman kneeling over him. She was shaking and sobbing

silently as she leaned to put pressure on the wound.

He took his bandana from his pocket and knelt down beside the young woman.

John's face looked pale, and his breathing was labored. Nathan spoke to his friend, but his eyes did not open. He removed the young woman's hand and placed the bandana over the bullet wound in hopes of staunching the flow of blood.

When he got a look at where the bullet had entered John's body, he lost any shred of hope that his friend might survive. He pressed hard on the wound and John's body convulsed with pain.

His eyes opened briefly and he looked directly at Nathan. He then lost focus for a couple of seconds and Nathan could see that he was trying with all of his might to communicate. He had agony in his gaze and his mouth was working as he raised his head to look at Nathan, trying to form the words.

"My girl–" John's arm was raised, trying to grasp Nathan's shirt

with a claw-like hand. Nathan took his hand, trying to soothe his friend.

"Take care of my bride… She's beautiful, isn't she?" the sheriff gasped, and blood trickled out of the corner of his mouth. His head fell back from the effort of speaking, yet his eyes were fixed on Leona.

Nathan took his friend's hand and promised him, "I will. You can go in peace."

He held John's hand, looking at his pale and friendly face, now contorted in agony. *At least he got to see her before he died*, Nathan thought briefly, then turned to look at the woman who had held all the promise for his friend's future.

John's breath became more labored and the woman beside him gasped along with him. She reached over and took him in her arms. It was then he recognized Leona Grove.

"Leona? L—Leona, is that you?" Nathan couldn't believe his eyes. Her lovely green eyes, still the same, but swimming with tears met his.

She looked scared and something else; she didn't seem to know him.

The two locked eyes, suspended in disbelief.

There was a sudden light of recognition in her eyes, but she didn't speak.

"What, h—how? Are? No, it can't be!" Nathan wondered if he hadn't sustained a head wound. *Leona is dead*, he reminded himself.

"When did you get here?" Nathan asked her. Leona didn't answer; she only shook her head, tears streaming down her face. Her eyes were on John Murray's lifeless face. Her body was wracked with silent sobs and she was trembling.

It suddenly dawned on Nathan why she was acting that way. "Are you John's mail-order bride?" he asked incredulously. He was feeling confusion and grief, and having a tough time piecing together what Leona's presence in Hunter Springs had to do with the death of his friend, the sheriff.

Leona nodded and squeezed her eyes shut. She laid the lifeless body down on the street as a man who could only be Will returned with the doctor. Will helped Leona to her feet as the doctor took her place next to John Murray's body. Nathan stood in front of her, his mind reeling from the events of the past few minutes.

He began to question Leona, trying to find out where she'd been and what had transpired. He'd been worrying and wondering about her for so long, that it hadn't quite sunk in that she was really back in Hunter Springs and standing right there in front of him.

"I didn't know that you were John's bride-to-be…" he began, drawing out his words as slowly as he was processing them. "How did you come to answer his advertisement?"

Leona just looked wide-eyed at him, then back to John's body and finally, to her brother Will. Nathan put his hand on Leona's arm and tried to connect with her. She seemed lost and frightened. Nathan's heart went out to her.

"Leona, it's going to be all right," he attempted to reassure her.

Leona looked terrified as she looked down at Nathan's grasp on her arm. Will stepped in and quickly removed Nathan's hand from his sister's arm with a warning look. Nathan stepped back from the siblings, confused.

"Will? I don't understand. What's wrong with Leona?" Nathan was truly bewildered, and everything was a jumble in his mind.

She crumpled as Will took her in his arms and whispered, "I'm so sorry, sis. I am so sorry."

Leona still said nothing but wept into her brother's chest.

Nathan was sure that Leona was in shock, and also wondered if she was angry or injured.

"Leona, why won't you talk to me? What is going on? Are you hurt? We all thought you were dead there for a while… I–I wrote you years ago, but there was no response. We heard you got away from the fire, and then nothing. I've been wondering about you for years..."

Nathan looked at Will imploringly. “Why won’t she answer me?”

Will held Leona tighter to try quell her shaking. He explained to Nathan, “She doesn’t speak much now. Ever since the fire.” He paused while Nathan took in the information.

“We use sign language, and she can make herself quite clear, once you know the signs. Thank you for helping her. This is such a terrible tragedy. She was so happy about coming back home to marry the sheriff. I’m not quite sure what we’ll do now.”

Will held Leona at arm’s length and looked at her stricken face.

“You remember Nathan, sis?”

Leona nodded and looked into Nathan’s eyes for the second time. He could see the depth of pain she felt over losing her intended husband. He felt his heart squeeze in his chest at the sight of her hurt and anguish.

He remembered the young girl he had been picking mushrooms

with all those years ago. He shook his head to clear his confusion.

"It's going to be all right, Leona," Nathan reassured her with a confidence he didn't really feel. "I've got to make arrangements for John now, I have to tell his sister he's gone." Nathan groaned inwardly at the tasks ahead of him.

Will stood in the street with Leona in his arms as the doctor finished his assessment of the deceased sheriff and left to go get the undertaker. He cast a good look at Nathan Carell then.

The man looked fit and strong, but he carried the grief and loss of his friend like a cloak that covered his entire being. Will remembered Nathan as a skinny kid who'd been infatuated with his sister. He looked like a fine man now. Will was glad it was him and not someone else who had been in the center of the tragedy. Leona had always liked and trusted him. Will thought that Nathan looked pretty broken up over what had happened. He must have been good friends with the sheriff, he reasoned.

"It's good to see you again, Nathan." Will shook Nathan's hand.

“I only regret that it’s in such tragic circumstances.”

Nathan nodded somberly.

“Thank you. John Murray is…” He trailed off, correcting himself bitterly, “*was* my closest friend. I’m dreading having to tell his sister he’s gone.”

Nathan shook his head, trying not to cry.

“It’s a terrible welcome home for you too, isn’t it?” he affirmed. “Let me know if I can help in any way. I’m still living in the same house. You know where to find me.”

Nathan took his leave then, walking out to find John’s sister, Susan Murray, to deliver the sad news. He thought she might take it a little easier coming from a friend.

As he walked, he reflected on the last time he’d seen Leona Grove. It seemed funny to him that the memory of her beautiful face was always wrapped up in the smoke and the acrid scent of fire. Six

years ago it had been the fire that had consumed her home, and then the smell of dust, smoke, and gunpowder that had filled the air earlier that day when he'd recognized her kneeling in the street.

Nathan Carell didn't understand why these tragedies continued to plague the Grove family, but he did know one thing: Leona Grove was back in Hunter Springs. He reckoned that two tragedies were more than enough for one person to bear. He hoped and prayed that his dear Leona wouldn't have to suffer any more in her lifetime, and that somehow she would find her voice and recover. He still felt tender towards her and believed that somehow Providence had a hand in reuniting them. All of his longing and dreaming of her aside, Nathan Carell wished for nothing more than to be the loving and supportive friend she needed in her time of sorrow.

He did not find Susan Murray at home, so he returned to the scene of the shooting only to find the undertaker and the doctor there. They had put John Murray's body on a wagon and were taking him towards the center of town. Leona and Will were standing there, both looking a bit lost and bewildered.

Nathan wanted to track down John's sister, but he couldn't take his eyes off Leona. She was such a tragic figure. Nathan's heart went out to her even as he grieved for the loss of his friend.

Will was doing his best to comfort Leona, but she seemed inconsolable. Her body still trembled and she wept silently, leaning against her brother. Will seemed at a loss as to how to comfort her. Clearly the events that coincided with their arrival in Hunter Springs had thrown him off kilter as well.

Chapter 5

Leona watched as the body of her fiancé was loaded on the wagon and slowly moved out towards the center of town. She felt as if she were swimming at the bottom of a deep pond. The pressure of the water pushed on her, and her vision swam in a blur.

She kept seeing the flash of flames through the water. She smelled the acrid smoke and was transported to the scene of her family tragedy. She saw the flames dance and the terrible beauty of the fire through her tears as dread washed over her. She held onto her brother, trembling, as she relived the horror of losing her parents and her family cat.

She was sorry she'd made the choice to come home to Hunter Springs. There were too many tragic memories to wrestle with. This place would always haunt her with death and destruction.

Why did I come back? she asked herself. The answer was being hauled away on a wagon.

Suddenly Nathan was walking towards her. He removed his hat,

shaking his head and wiping a tear as the wagon that held his friend's body rolled past him. She met him as he approached.

Leona shook herself out of her maudlin state and looked at the boy she used to know, now grown into a fine man. Nathan carried himself confidently, yet still had a tender side that he showed to her immediately upon recognizing her distress.

"What do you say we get you out of the street? You don't need to stay here."

Leona nodded and took his arm. She heard Will huff as they turned from the bloody scene. Will seemed upset with Nathan, but she didn't know why. As far as she knew, Nathan had always been a friend to her family.

"Let's get your baggage, and you can bring it up to my house. You need to get cleaned up and change clothes."

Leona looked at Nathan gratefully, and nodded. She wiped her tears with her handkerchief and looked sadly at her ruined dress and

bloodstained hands. She hiccupped, still trying to catch her breath. She couldn't wait to change out of her dress and wash away the grim evidence of the horror.

Nathan stopped and turned back to Will. "What do you say, Will?" Nathan asked. "Where'd you leave your cases?"

Leona looked at him with the question in her eyes. She indicated her desire to do exactly what Nathan had suggested.

"I'll go to the livery and hire that buggy again. I don't see how else we'll get our baggage up to your place. Thank you for the invitation, Nathan. It's pretty gracious of you considering…" Will paused, unsure of how to finish the sentence without opening up old resentments.

Nathan smoothed it over. "It's fine," he said. "John wanted me to take care of his bride. I just didn't know it would be Leona!" he added with a sad note in his voice.

"Come on, Leona. We'll get our baggage and meet Nathan at his

house.” Will held out his hand to Leona, who shook her head.

“*I want to walk with him*,” she signed to Will. He scowled at her but she was resolute. Will sighed resignedly.

He had a difficult time letting Leona out of his sight, he’d watched over her for so long, but he supposed she’d be safe enough with Nathan.

He leaned over and kissed his sister on the cheek. “See you soon, sis.”

The dismissive sign was enough for Nathan to understand Leona’s wish.

He shook Nathan’s hand, noting the blood stains on his hands and sleeves as well. “I’ll see you at your house. Might catch up to you on the way.”

“Bye, Will,” Nathan said. He and Leona began the trek up the mountain road.

The reunited friends walked in silence. Leona began to see familiar scenery as they walked along.

After about twenty minutes, she put her hand on Nathan's arm and motioned him to stop. He could see that she was out of breath and needed to rest.

"All those years of city living have made you soft," Nathan teased her gently. She nodded.

"Here's a shady spot to sit down." Nathan directed her to a pile of boulders on the side of the road. Leona sank down gratefully. Her legs were tired. Nathan was right, city living had made her soft. In the past she'd not given a thought to the hike to town and back.

"Will might catch up with us, if you'd like to wait for the buggy," Nathan offered.

Leona smiled and shook her head. She knew they were close to the property. Everything looked familiar. Unlike in Hunter Springs,

the scenery had changed very little in the six years she'd been away.

They soon heard the sound of wagon wheels as Will came up behind them. They had almost reached the fencepost that was the southwest corner of the Grove property. The gate to the Carell property was on the opposite side of the road.

Nathan and Leona stepped aside as Will pulled up next to them. There was a teenaged boy with him. Nathan recognized the son of the livery stable owner.

"Hello, Joshua."

"Hi Mr. Carell. Pa wants the horse back tonight. So, I'm going to drive him back down after you get unloaded." He was proud his father had entrusted him with the task. "Sorry to hear about Sheriff John, Mr. Carell. I know you were good buddies."

"Thank you, Joshua. We were." Nathan's voice broke. He cleared his throat and continued, "Hold up, I'll get the gate for you."

Nathan went to the gate. He swung it wide and left it open as Will drove through and continued up to the house. He turned back to see Leona standing at the corner of the fence to her old homestead. He went along to help Will and Joshua unload the cart and get Joshua back on the road.

Leona eventually made her way up the winding driveway to the Carells' house. Nathan came in, showing Will to his father's bedroom and instructing him to put the baggage in there.

"Leona, give me a few minutes to clear out a few things and you can have my room. I'll sleep out here. You both just make yourselves at home, you may as well be family, so feel free to do whatever you need. I'll get water heating soon for a bath for you Leona.

"Meanwhile, there's a washbasin and a pitcher in my room and you can use the towel on the hook behind the door to wash your hands and face. I need to do the same," he said sadly, looking at his bloodstained hands and cuffs. The grief welled up in him again, but he was distracted by the next comment coming from Will Grove.

Will looked around the cabin and snorted derisively at the notion of being Nathan's family.

"Where's your old man?" he sneered. "I'll bet he wouldn't want us to make ourselves at home."

"I'm sure you're right, Will," Nathan agreed. "Pa's in Nevada at my cousin Agnes' place. He'll be there for a few more weeks. I guess that's time enough for you and Leona to decide where you're going to stay. In the meantime, you are welcome here."

Leona looked for a certain suitcase in the pile. Finding it, she picked it up and went into Nathan's room and closed the door behind her, leaving the two men alone in the common room.

Will sorted through the cases, putting Leona's luggage outside the bedroom door, and stacking his own in Milton's room. He, too, wanted to clean himself up and change into fresh clothes. His mind was still reeling with all that had happened that day. It made him wonder in awe at how quickly life circumstances could change one's future.

First the fire, then the murder of Leona's intended. Two tragedies that had first driven them from their home, and then, upon their return, caused them to rethink every plan and decision.

When Will finished washing up and changing he came out of the room to find Nathan and Leona in the kitchen. Nathan sat at the small dining table, and Leona stood gazing out the window that looked out over the land. She could see the trees where she'd harvested mushrooms so often, and the path up to the ruins of the burned-out pile of rubble that used to be her home. She reckoned that Milton Carell had been up here at the house that day and had seen her and Nathan together, and also seen her leaving for home from their mushroom-picking adventure.

Will came up behind her, touching her on the shoulder.

"There sure are a lot of mixed memories here, aren't there?" he asked.

Leona nodded. She turned to look at Nathan, who also seemed

caught up in his own memories. She supposed he was thinking of his friend John Murray.

She signed to Will, "*Happy and sad.*" She nodded her agreement. She had been completely lost in memories of her childhood and of the fire. She still carried the scars on her arm. She looked at her mutilated arm and rubbed it lightly.

Will took her hand with understanding. "I know, sis. It's both. I'm sort of happy to be back home, but it does bring back a lot of hard memories."

He poured himself a glass of lemonade that Nathan had put on the table, along with three glasses and walked into the common room, lost in his own thoughts.

Nathan left Leona to her own musings. He felt that she needed time and space to process the events that had led the trio to his home instead of to John Murray's that day.

He thought of John's sister again. He was sad that he'd been

unable to be the one to break the news of her brother's demise to her. He figured she probably knew by now.

He and Will hadn't said much to one another, but Nathan felt like it was important to at least try to make peace between them. The old grudge of land and water rights had no place in the midst of this tragic event, and Nathan felt like he had to try to smooth things over with Will.

"What do you think you'll do now, Will?" he asked. "Have you thought about where you'll live?" Nathan hastened to add, "Of course, you're both welcome to stay with me until my father returns. I'll help you in any way I can. I just want you to know that I don't side with my father's opinion about your family and the well."

Will scowled and shook his head. "That grudge was a source of pain for my parents. I realize it has nothing to do with us now, but it still rankles."

Will stood up and paced back and forth. He glanced up at Leona, still standing by the kitchen window looking out at their land.

“As for the future, I don’t know yet, Nathan. I guess we’ll stay for a few days, then get a place in town until we can make arrangements to go back to Ohio. I severed ties with our landlady and my employer, but I think they’ll probably take us back, that is, if Mrs. Applegate hasn’t rented our rooms yet.”

Leona came striding into the room at the mention of their return to Ohio. She shook her head at Will emphatically signing, “*No. I don’t want to go back to Ohio*.”

Will looked at her in surprise. He was taken aback by his sister’s assertion that she wanted to stay. He couldn’t for the life of him fathom why she would want to remain with all the memories and now, with the death of her intended also weighing on her emotions.

“Why, Leona? Why on earth would you want to stay here? There’s nothing for us here. Now that Sheriff Murray is, um, gone. Don’t you want to go back to Akron where we were happy?”

Leona’s eyes welled with tears at her brother’s words. She signed

to him, "*No*." Shaking her head again, she continued, "*I want to stay here. This is home*." She looked at her brother imploringly.

Will saw the determination in his sister's eyes. He asked her again, "Are you certain? I'm worried you won't be happy here."

Leona came over to him, embracing him gently. She stepped back and looked at Nathan, then at her brother. She placed her hand on her heart and nodded to Will. Her mouth formed the words, "*This is home*." She repeated the sign for home.

Will loved Leona so much that he knew he could not deny her whatever she desired. Within his own heart and mind, he realized he wanted to stay in Hunter Springs too.

He had dreams of rebuilding their family home. He didn't expect that Leona would continue to be his responsibility when he shouldered the burden of building the new home and making the Grove farm thrive again, but he reckoned he could do both.

"Have it your way then, Leona," he sighed. "We'll stay." Leona

threw her arms around his waist and nodded briskly. When she looked up at him, her eyes were shining. Will knew he was making the right decision.

“Nathan, I guess we’ll take you up on your offer to stay here a little while, thank you. It won’t be long. I need to find us lodgings in town until we can build the new house.”

“That sounds like a good plan, Will,” Nathan agreed.

Leona turned from her brother’s embrace and came to sit near him on the settee. Her freshly washed face was aglow.

With her near him, he knew that he would gladly fill the charge given to him, John’s dying wish for him to care for his bride.

He also understood how Will could not deny anything to his sweet, beautiful sister.

Nathan knew that if she wanted anything in this life, he would move heaven and earth to make sure she had it. She already had his

heart.

Chapter 6

Nathan was preparing breakfast. He had awakened with the dawn, getting the eggs gathered and throwing some scraps for the chickens after putting on the pot for coffee. He was slicing a slab of bacon and whipping some eggs when Will came into the kitchen.

"Mornin' Will," Nathan greeted him. "Breakfast will be ready soon, want some coffee?"

Will rubbed his eyes and nodded. "Thanks, yes. I'd love some."

"Did you get any sleep?" Nathan asked. Will looked careworn and haggard, like a man with a great deal of weight resting on his shoulders and mind. He took the cup Nathan handed him and sat heavily in a kitchen chair.

"Not much," Will replied. "That is a comfortable bed, but I couldn't seem to rest."

Nathan nodded. "It's understandable, there's a lot to think about."

Nathan sympathized, he was sure that Will had some big decisions to face, but for himself, he was curious about how Will and Leona had learned to communicate, and how her lack of speech had manifested.

“Has Leona been unable to speak since the fire?” he asked Will. “I am curious about how the two of you communicate and how you learned that language you use. Can you tell me about that?”

Will sighed. He didn’t really want to relive old memories, but it seemed that was all he had been doing since arriving in Hunter Springs. He decided that since he and Leona were taking advantage of Nathan’s hospitality and would be for at least a little while, Nathan deserved to know about how he and Leona communicated. He knew that Nathan had always liked Leona and had looked up to him, so he felt kindly disposed to share the details.

“After we got out of the house, we ran to town. Leona’s arm had been burned pretty badly. She had reached into the flames trying to get to our mother, and a beam fell across her arm, catching her sleeve

on fire. I pulled her to safety, and we got out of the house. I knew our parents were both already lost. We saw them consumed in the fire. It was horrible." Will felt his chest constrict at the memory of that terrible day.

It took him a moment to get himself together to proceed. He'd thought he'd put plenty of distance between him and that tragic event. Maybe it was being back where it all happened, he wasn't sure, but he felt far more emotional recounting it than he ever had.

"I patted the flames out on Leona's dress, but the fabric had fused itself to her arm and to part of her torso. It took a lot of work by the doctor and his nurse to remove it." Will paused to gather his thoughts, then continued.

"When we got to the doctor's office, she was in a pretty bad way. I had carried her the last quarter of a mile. The doctor sedated her, and he and his assistant spent a very long time cleaning and treating the burn. They had to soak the arm, and her ribcage, and soften the skin to peel the fabric from the wound, it was awful." Will bit his lip and shook his head at the sharpness of that memory.

“Leona had stopped crying and was silent and stoic about the pain, but I know it must have been tremendous. I understand better now that she had retreated into her mind to protect herself.”

Nathan didn’t speak or interrupt Will, he was reliving the terror he had felt that same day thinking that they had been killed in the blaze.

Will continued, “We stayed in the surgery room overnight so they could monitor Leona’s wounds and keep her sedated against the pain. The next day we were able to get a ride into Tombstone. We went to a friend of my father’s home, not knowing where else to turn. Mr. Jacobus and his wife took us in on the spot and were very kind to us. Mrs. Jacobus nursed Leona and helped us deal with all the details of our parents’ death, and the legalities of the estate and the land and all.”

Will stared at the coffee cup in his hand, then took a sip.

“Was Leona mute from then on?” Nathan asked.

Will nodded. “Mr. Jacobus and his wife were very willing to help us. I think they owed my father a debt of some sort, but I never found out what. They offered to let us stay as long as we needed. They had room in their home as their children were grown and gone, and they were approaching their golden years…” His voice trailed off, his mind wandering.

“I went back to them after a few days, and they took care of Leona. They took her in to see the doctor regularly until her arm was healed. Then they took her weekly to doctors all over the region. The doctors told them that they couldn’t find any physical reason why she couldn’t speak. She would say a few words here and there, so it wasn’t anything physical.

“It was determined that the lack of speech had to be from the shock of the trauma she’d experienced. The burn on her arm left a nasty scar, and they reasoned the scars on her psyche were even more painful and injurious.”

Nathan felt his heart aching, yet he opted for silence.

“Some of the doctors recalled that there were similar cases in men that had returned from battle in the Civil War. Soldiers who had witnessed horrors on the battlefield who had lost their faculties of speech upon returning home. Some were able to recover after spending time in a sanatorium under medical supervision. Others never did recover and were reduced to being shells of their former selves due to the trauma they’d experienced.”

Will paused and looked at Nathan, knowing that this was a lot of information to take in.

He hoped he was giving Nathan some insight into his sister’s state of mind.

“We eventually ran out of medical doctors to consult,” Will continued. “We took her to a psychiatric facility, a place where people with mental disorders are housed. It was a terrible place. I couldn’t leave Leona there. The doctors said what was plaguing her was something called selective mutism. I had never heard of that.”

“She didn’t choose silence, did she?” Nathan asked, fixating on the word “selective.”

“No.” Will went on, “Leona tried very hard to speak and communicate, but her power of speech was simply not available to her. It seemed that the pain and grief of the tragedy were too much for her to bear. Her mind was actually protecting her from going mad. If she had to take it in all at once and process it enough to talk about it she might literally go insane. The selective mutism was a way for her to limit her communication so that her brain could deal with all the pain and trauma in the background without her having to acknowledge it.”

He seemed oddly acquainted with the narrative and Nathan assumed he had heard it way too many times.

“The doctor said it could take months or even years for her brain to process the shock of being burned in the fire and losing our parents. Until then she would be silent. We had no way of knowing how long it would be.”

“That’s terrible,” Nathan said, feeling compassion for both Will and Leona. “I’m so sorry you’ve had to go through this. She’s so fortunate she’s had you to care for her and protect her all this time,” Nathan said emphatically.

“How did you learn the language of gestures and the, what do you call it? Hand spelling?”

Will nodded. “Finger spelling. There’s an entire alphabet you can spell with your fingers. It’s not hard to learn. But I digress.” Will stood up and walked around to get more coffee from the stove.

“I did a lot of research and found that there had been such a language developed in the 1880s for profoundly deaf people. They could learn to ‘sign’ and spell with gestures and make themselves understood. This language was taught in schools for the deaf. Prior to this language being invented, deaf people were thought to be mentally deficient or retarded and were often institutionalized simply because they could not hear.”

Nathan was fascinated by the story and asked Will more about

the language.

"Leona wasn't deaf, though…" Nathan paused.

"Exactly," Will agreed. "I found a school in Akron, Ohio where this method was being taught. That's what led us to Ohio. The teachers there agreed to teach both of us the American Sign Language so that Leona could learn to speak it, as it were, and I could learn to understand it. We've been learning and communicating using that language ever since."

"Did Leona ever begin to speak more often, or did she stay silent this entire time?" Nathan asked.

Then, suddenly, a strong desire surged through him. "Could you teach me to read the sign language, too?"

Will considered the question for a moment. He wasn't sure if he wanted to let Nathan into his and Leona's secret world of communication. It almost felt like an invasion of their privacy. However, if they were going to be staying in his home, Will supposed

it couldn't hurt. It might do Leona some good to have someone else to talk to.

"Leona does speak, but rarely," he answered. Nathan looked at him expectantly for the reply to the other part of his question.

"I suppose I could teach you to read it…" Will thought about it. "Not sure how to begin, but I guess I'll just interpret what Leona signs when you're around and I will teach you the alphabet. I'll have to tell her to slow down, because she finger spells very fast. It will be hard for you to follow at first, but you'll catch on. Remember to tell her to slow down if she's going too fast."

Just as Will started to speak again, Leona entered the kitchen. Signing to Will and nodding at Nathan.

"She said good morning, and how did I sleep," he interpreted.

Will shrugged and said, "Badly."

Leona took over cooking from Nathan without a word, simply

reaching for the knife in his hand and slicing bread for the meal.

Nathan felt his heart swell just standing next to her, the scent of her hair, freshly washed, was like lilacs, and he was dazzled by her beauty, even though she still bore puffy eyes from weeping and her countenance was sad.

“Good morning, Leona,” he greeted her. She nodded to him.

“There’s coffee on the stove if you’d like some.”

She shook her head and signed something to her brother.

“She wants to know what I was thinking about that kept me up all night,” Will relayed to Nathan.

“I’ve thought it through, sis, and I cannot figure out a way that we can remain in Hunter Springs.” Leona’s head whipped around at Will’s statement.

“*Why?*” she signed. “*I want to stay home*,” she signed again with

her thumb touching her fingers and then touching the corner of her mouth and then her cheek near her ear, the same way she had the previous evening. It was the gesture that meant “home.”

Will talked about his prospects of finding work practicing the law, the difficulties of building a home and paying rent to live somewhere while the house was being built, and his reluctance to stay in a place where all of their memories were painful and tragic.

Leona was becoming increasingly upset and agitated. She chopped a melon with sharp strokes, then put down the knife. Turning to Will she wiped her hands on a towel then took his hands in hers.

“*I will work*,” she signed to him.

Will chuckled and replied, “Not to demean your willingness to work, but you left school when you were sixteen! I don’t know that there’s a lot you can do around here, either. I think it will be best if we go back to Ohio where at least I know I can make us a living.”

Leona signed “*sewing*” as if miming an invisible needle and

thread. Will just smiled sadly and shook his head.

"I don't think so," he responded. "I'm sorry, sis."

Leona's face fell. She looked sadder and more downcast than Nathan had seen her, even at the death of her husband-to-be. It was almost more than Nathan could bear, to see her in such pain and grief again. He reckoned he would do just about anything to save her from feeling so sad. He would do anything.

Before he could stop himself, and before he even thought it through, he blurted out, "Leona could marry me. Then you both could stay. Will, you could support yourself, and I could, well… Leona?" The impact of what he'd just said struck him then and he stopped mid-sentence.

He looked at Leona's beautiful green eyes, wide with surprise, then at Will, whose mouth was hanging open, as he, too, was speechless at Nathan's suggestion.

Chapter 7

Leona heard Nathan speak as if in a dream. This boy she'd loved when they were too young to know what love was; she'd carried her fantasy of Nathan around with her through all the tragedy and loss. If only he knew how she had longed for him in her silent world of pain throughout her years in Ohio. The fact that he still wanted her now, to her, was only further proof of what a good, upright, and wonderful person he truly was.

It didn't surprise her to know that he and John Murray had been close friends. She had come to think of John, through his letters, as a fine man, full of righteous zeal for the law and integrity in all his dealings.

The fact that his last thought was of her touched her very deeply and caused her to hold his memory in very high esteem. She knew she always would think of him as a fine and honorable person. She regretted not getting the chance to meet him and get to know him in person. His letters were full of descriptions of his life in Hunter Springs, his domestic life with his sister, and his desire to live lawfully in a town where people respected and helped one another.

As his words sunk in and took hold, she spun to look Nathan directly in the eye. She thought at first, she'd misheard what he said.

Then, when he stopped speaking so abruptly and spoke her name wistfully questioning, looking at her like she was the cherry on the top of a hot fudge sundae, she suddenly wanted to burst forth in song.

Instead, she managed to squeak out a quiet, "Yes!" her voice barely more than a whisper.

"Yes!" Nathan echoed, lost in the green of her eyes. He spoke to the pain there, of the love he had always borne for her. That love had never been lost, even when her personal whereabouts had been unknown to him. He rejoiced in hearing her voice, even a breath of a whisper. He looked away from her gaze to see Will coming towards Leona, ready to confront her. The man clearly did not share their happy feelings.

"Are you out of your mind?" Will bellowed, causing Leona to take a step back from him at the force of his explosive anger.

“You cannot just barter your hand in marriage away for the safety of a home!” he thundered at her.

She looked back at him directly in the eye, resolute. She started to sign to him, but he batted her hands down and then grabbed her hands in his. Leona was taken aback at his actions; he’d never disregarded her like that before. That made her angry and she pulled her hands away from his and made several gestures that Nathan didn’t understand. Their effect was immediate. Will stood straight, tall, grim and unyielding. Nathan feared their cause was lost before they’d even begun. He quickly stood up and made a move as if to step between the siblings before the argument escalated.

“Will, it’s not like that. I’ve always cared for Leona. I respect her and care for her still. I want what she wants. For her, for both of you, to stay here in Hunter Springs. If you want to stay, then fine, you can do that as well, but this is a practical solution to both of your problems. I know it caught you by surprise…”

Nathan paused, realizing he was in a haze as well. “It caught me

by surprise, too. John Murray was my closest friend, and while I wouldn't have been thrilled to see him marry my childhood ideal of a wife, I promised to grant his dying wish, which was to take care of Leona." Nathan was breathless at the end of his speech, but he wasn't finished yet.

"I truly want Leona to stay. To stay with me," he concluded, looking at both of them.

Will could see he was in earnest and while he appreciated what Nathan had said, he replied, "I'm sorry, that's just not enough."

He was ready to give his arguments as if it were a day in court, but before he could summon his thoughts, Leona stepped forward. She took Will's arm and looked intently into her brother's eyes.

Nathan held his breath as the two of them communicated silently. Will seemed to soak in everything Leona was communicating to him simply with her eyes. He darted a look at Nathan who simply stood his ground, not knowing what else he could possibly say.

Will seemed to suddenly wilt under Leona's gaze. He turned to Will. "Are you asking my sister for her hand simply because you find yourself in need of a wife, and one happens to be available?"

Nathan scoffed at the question. "Will, I have loved your sister since I was a lad in short pants," he declared, looking hard to read the expression on Leona's face, as she was expectedly silent. She returned his gaze evenly, not betraying her inner turmoil.

Nathan continued, "I had no idea that you two were the woman and her brother that John Murray was expecting on the Tombstone train. When I saw Leona yesterday, I had no idea why she had returned. Once I put it all together I had already given my vow to care for John's fiancé. So you see, everything that happened actually could work, in this situation." It was a reasonable argument.

"Leona can stay with me and be my bride. I will treasure, cherish, and care for her." Nathan looked into Leona's face. "For you," he declared.

"Will, this will leave you free of responsibility for Leona, as I

have good employment prospects and will be able to financially support her. You can pursue your own prospects either here or in Tombstone, rebuild your family home and your life here in Hunter Springs. We can finally reunite our two families and the land that was such a source of anguish for our parents."

Will took in what Nathan said without comment. He removed Leona's hand from his arm and walked out through the kitchen door into the yard. Strolling around to the side yard, he stopped and looked long and hard at the land across the road. His land. The burnt-out ruin of what used to be his home still remained, the timbers charred and twisted from the flames.

Years of dormancy had caused grass and plants to grow up between the foundation. The old brick chimney had crumbled and lay in a heap at the side. As Will watched, a squirrel popped up from inside the brick rubble, peeking his head out and looking furtively around. He then dashed out and climbed a nearby tree, chattering as he ascended to the highest branches.

Will felt something stir within him then, a feeling that he hadn't

had in over six years since he'd watched his life go up in flames. He felt like he had finally come home.

He knew then that he would give Leona and Nathan a chance to be together, and that he would be free to make a home for himself here, the place where he belonged.

He breathed out a deep exhale. He took in the sounds of the birds and the scent of the fruit trees, unpruned and overladen with bounty. Birds swooped in and took their fill of the rotting fruit that lay under them. As he took it all in he began to plan how he would rebuild and rejuvenate the land. He'd get that well repaired and back in working order. That might be a source of income if he could sell some of the rights to the water, he reasoned. He'd need to do some research.

He decided to go tell Leona and Nathan the good news; he'd held them in suspense long enough. He turned and went back inside feeling settled, his decision made.

Nathan was sitting on the settee next to Leona. At first Will

thought they were holding hands, but at a second glance he realized that Leona was teaching Nathan the sign language alphabet.

"I have the books from the school in one of my trunks. They have pictures of the hand positions, it will make it easier to learn to read them. You have to sign slowly for Nathan until he learns how to read the gestures, Leona. You'll have plenty of time to do that now, it seems," he told them.

They both looked up at him expectantly. He didn't want to keep them in suspense, so he got right to his point.

"Leona, I know you're of age and you can marry whom you please, you don't need my permission. I am not sure if I fully support the idea of you marrying Nathan. I fear it's going to cause trouble in his relationship with his father considering the past dealings of our two families. With that being said, you have your own mind and heart. I know you had it set on marrying Sheriff Murray, and that was not to be. Nathan is a fine man, and I believe he truly cares for you, so I am going to be pleased to walk you down the aisle."

Leona and Nathan both sprang up, hands still clasped together, to approach Will.

He held his hand up. “I’m not quite finished. I would like you to wait a little while. Out of respect for Sheriff Murray, and his sister, and to be absolutely certain that this is what you both want, and not simply a quick solution to a difficult problem, because I am sure your marriage will create an entire set of new problems when Milton Carell returns. Nathan?” Will looked at Nathan eye to eye.

“I’m certain you’re right about that,” he replied. “Thank you for seeing things our way. I’ll wait, but I, er, *we*… don’t want to wait long now that our decision has been made, you understand.” Nathan was confident and adamant in his speech.

Leona threw her arms around her brother’s neck and kissed him on the cheek. She had tears streaming down her face and she was smiling. She stepped back to sign to her brother. The gestures continued as Will and Nathan looked intently at her hands and face. She formed many of the words without sound, but the meaning soon became clear.

She wanted Will to build a house on the property for himself and one for them. She thought that Mr. Carell would not want them to stay in his home nor on his land. Will interpreted her reasoning to Nathan and he agreed.

“My job in town is lucrative enough. I can afford to pay to have the house built, but I am too busy to supervise the project. Will, if you will oversee the building of both places, then we can room in town at the boarding house until they are habitable. What do you say? I’m willing to put up the cash up front to pay the architect and builder to get the plans drawn and hire the workmen.”

Will thought about Nathan’s proposal. He liked the idea of having Leona living close by. The investment capital Nathan was offering was a good incentive.

“That sounds like a good plan, Nathan. I may just build a shack on the place to stay in until the house is ready. I haven’t lived alone, well, ever. It might be fun to camp out a while. The weather is nice enough and we have time to get the majority of the construction done

before monsoon season hits. I need to talk to my bankers in Ohio and get things arranged, and then we can start planning. It looks like we have agreed about the building. Now, about the marriage. It shouldn't take much to get a preacher to officiate. I wonder if two weeks is long enough?"

The two men shook hands and Leona looked back and forth between her brother and her fiancé, hardly believing that Nathan Carell was to be her husband.

Two weeks? She hoped he wouldn't change his mind.

She realized as she watched Nathan and her brother plan and negotiate, that she'd not ever had a chance to love John Murray, she'd only loved the idea of being his wife. He had seemed like a perfect way for her to find a husband, a companion, to free her brother to live his own life, and also to find her way back home to Hunter Springs, which she'd longed to do for several years. Akron and the school were good, but she had grown tired of working in the boarding house with Mrs. Applegate, the sameness and routine had made her long for adventure. When she had answered John Murray's mail-order bride

advertisement and they had begun corresponding, it had seemed like the perfect adventure to embark upon.

Nathan Carell was a completely different story. She had always loved him, even before she knew what love was. She realized it when she was in Ohio and thought she might never see him again.

As she stood there now, looking into Nathan Carell's sweet face, full of concern and care for her, she knew truly, that he had always loved her, too.

Chapter 8

Nathan paced back and forth at the altar, fidgeting with the tight collar on the snug suit he was wearing. He felt stifled in the close atmosphere of the small country church. He had never been much of a church-going man. His family had gone every Sunday while his mother was alive, but not since her passing nearly seven years ago. He felt closest to the Creator when he was in his mountain home, surrounded by the trees, birds and wild game.

He felt out of place and anxious. He knew that this formality had to be accomplished but he would have been just as happy to be married out of doors on a hilltop, or in a garden.

His discomfort also had to do in no small part to the length of time it was taking for the ceremony to begin. The minutes seemed to drag, and what was in reality only a quarter of an hour felt like eternity as he stood looking at the door through which his bride would be emerging.

Nathan wanted, more than anything else, to begin his married life with Leona and have this wedding ceremony over and done with.

He wanted to get on with their lives together. They had a house to build and a very long life to live.

Nathan had already made arrangements for them to return to the boarding house rooms to begin their married life and had moved his belongings into the rooms that very morning. Leona had done so the previous day with Nathan's assistance. She already wanted to make curtains and duvet covers for the bed and to put her own feminine stamp on their sparse lodgings.

Nathan looked sideways at Will, who was handsome and well put together in his stylish suit. Nathan admired how effortlessly he wore the professional look and figured Will would probably fit in no matter the event or occasion. He had always admired Will and the ease with which he carried himself in all situations. When they were both boys, there was something about Will, his studious nature, his athleticism, and the way he treated his sister, that Nathan had looked up to.

Now though, he felt like they were on par with each other, peers, instead of divided by status. Each man had his own life. Although there were times when Nathan felt that Will viewed him as a rival for

his sister, a fact with which Nathan tried to be sympathetic, but also thought was a bit absurd.

Nathan felt a little like a fish out of water waiting there in the church in his too tight suit. He worked in casual clothes for his job, unlike Will, who had to present a professional image in his law office. Nathan briefly considered how many suits Will must own. He compared it laughingly to himself, to the two suits that hung in his own wardrobe at the cabin. He found himself wishing he'd tried his good suit on last week so he could have had the waist of the pants and the jacket let out a little bit for comfort. He knew he could tolerate anything for a little while longer aware that Leona was the reward at the end of the suffering. It was a small price to pay to be able to wed the woman he loved.

Aside from the scratchy suit, his face felt itchy and chapped. He'd gone to the barber for a close shave and a haircut the previous day and his face still felt every scrape of the barber's blade. It seemed that all of his senses were heightened in anticipation of seeing his bride walk down the aisle.

“Don’t you think you should go bring your sister down now?” Nathan prompted him. Will chuckled. He was enjoying Nathan’s discomfort just a little too much.

“You’ve waited for nearly two weeks; you can stand to wait a few minutes longer,” Will chided him. “I’m not in such a hurry to get my sister married off to you.” Nathan couldn’t tell if Will was being serious.

Meanwhile, Nathan thought, *I’ve waited nearly ten years, more like it…*

Nathan scowled at Will’s comment, but quickly let it go. He was even more certain that he wanted to marry Leona than he was when he broached the subject in his kitchen on that fateful morning, just a couple of short weeks ago.

“If you want to run out, you still have a chance to get away. There’s still time!” Will offered, clearly joking this time around. Nathan frowned again, shaking his head.

He couldn't understand why Will still held some kind of animosity or grudge against him. He wasn't sure just what it could be. Nathan thought they had talked about everything between their two families. He still felt like Will was angry with him. Maybe it was that Nathan had not tried harder to help him and Leona during the fire. Maybe he just wasn't happy about letting his sister go and the changes in life that it meant for both of them. Will's whole purpose in life had been to protect and care for his sister. Now that purpose was gone, and he might be angry about it. Nathan pushed the thoughts from his mind and prompted Will again. "I'm not going anywhere Will, you should know that. It's time now, please go get my bride."

Nathan had a serious face that Will noted and became more serious, too. "Things sure don't work out the way we think they will, do they?"

Nathan shook his head. "No, they don't, but I can tell you that there's never been another woman I've wanted to marry since the day I met Leona."

Will could see Nathan was totally in earnest. He relented and

softened at the idea that Nathan had long harbored feelings for Leona. He believed that, while this wasn't the original plan he had for his sister, Nathan Carell would be a good husband to Leona and they had a good chance of being happy together.

Will left to meet his sister and Nathan continued to pace with anticipation. He found himself hearkening back to those early days when he and Leona were both children and had no idea of what love truly was. They had always had a special connection that transcended description. Nathan just felt better when Leona was with him. She had a way of making everything seem right. He knew that their future together would be simply a continuation of their earlier relationship. In spite of all the hardship and trouble that had transpired in both their lives since they'd been apart, Nathan was absolutely certain that they would get a fairy tale happy ending.

The minister came in with his notes and the Holy Book and placed them on the lectern. He noted Nathan's unease.

"She'll be here soon, son. I can see you're ready to get on with it," he chuckled, as Nathan nodded his agreement. The minister smiled

knowingly. He shook Nathan's hand and wished him well, then the music began.

Nathan and Leona had decided to keep the wedding a small private affair out of respect for John Murray and his family. The minister agreed to officiate and had his spinster sister play the music for the ceremony. Will and the minister's wife were to be the witnesses and would sign the marriage certificate.

The tall doors to the foyer of the church opened up as the music swelled and the breezy cadence transitioned into the wedding march. The minister's wife came first, walking slowly in time with the notes. She was carrying a small nosegay of flowers and wearing her Sunday best dress and a string of pearls. Her graying brunette hair was piled upon her head with tendrils falling on each side of her plump, matronly face.

Nathan met her eyes as she stepped to the side of the altar. She smiled and her eyes sparkled as she met his gaze, then she looked at her husband with love as she took her place to stand with the bride. The minister smiled and nodded at his wife, shuffling his papers on

the lectern.

Then, suddenly, there was Leona.

Nathan saw nothing but her as she floated towards him as if on gossamer. She had the arm of her brother to steady her, but Nathan barely registered Will's presence. The spell was cast. Leona was resplendent in a white dress with a modest train. The dress had a fitted bodice and gathered waist that showed off her lovely curves. The neckline was modest but showed enough of her lovely throat that Nathan could scarcely look away. Leona's long, lovely golden hair was both pinned up and flowing, topped by a circlet of daisies with a yellow ribbon that matched the ribbon that tied the stems on the bouquet of pink roses she carried in front of her. The pink of the roses was the very color of Leona's lips and the blush of her cheeks.

Nathan couldn't take his eyes off the vision that was his bride. Once their gazes met, his eyes reflected the sparkle in Leona's lovely green orbs. Nathan felt suddenly connected to her as she approached, like a lightning bolt arced from his heart to hers. She seemed to be tethered to him by electric energy that sealed her into his heart with

fire and spark. When they arrived to stand in front of the altar, they both felt the shock when Will kissed his sister's cheek, put Leona's hand in Nathan's and stepped to the side. It was a jolting physical sensation that almost caused Nathan to trip as he stepped forward. He could not feel his feet and couldn't see anything but emotion in the depths of Leona's gaze. He gasped and Leona echoed him. They had both forgotten to breathe. They both chuckled quietly as the rush of oxygen reached their brains.

Then, as the minister smiled, cleared his throat, and opened his book, they both took a deep breath and became completely serious. Nathan and Leona kept their gaze locked together as they awaited the reading of the wedding ceremony and exchange of vows that would join them forever.

Chapter 9

Leona didn't expect to be so nervous.

Truly, she never anticipated that the wedding she'd traveled thousands of miles to attend would be to her childhood friend and companion. She sighed in frustration at her hair. She kept getting the pins stuck the wrong way. She stood up and looked at her image. In spite of her hair being an unruly mess, she was quite pleased with her reflection in the full-length mirror of the dressing room.

Mrs. Applegate, her former landlady, had gone with her in Akron to purchase her wedding gown. Since Leona was planning to marry the sheriff of Hunter Springs, a man of modest means, she had chosen a simple gown of white silk, with a trim silhouette and a lace bodice that modestly covered her up to her throat. Pearl buttons, lace trim on the skirt and a short, rounded train were the only added adornments.

Leona had spent several days prior to the wedding with a seamstress in Hunter Springs. The cross-country journey had caused her to become thin, and the seamstress altered the dress to fit her to perfection.

Leona was glad she'd chosen the dress, because Nathan, too, was a man of humble tastes; even though he was moderately wealthy, as Leona had recently learned. The majority of his wealth was tied up in the mining company in which he had recently been made a partner.

Nathan never spoke of money but had sat down with Leona and Will the previous week to draft a last will and testament. He felt it was prudent, since they were to be married. He knew, especially in light of the death of his friend John Murray, that one never knew when their time on this earth would end, and with the animosity his father felt towards the Grove family, he couldn't trust that his bride would be properly cared for in the event that something happened to Nathan.

He appointed Will the title of Executor, knowing that Will would take care of his sister and had the legal ability to deal with Nathan's father, should there ever be a dispute. Leona was happy to know that there would be financial security in her marriage as well as good feelings.

Leona felt like this marriage had to be pre-ordained. For the first

time in many years, she felt at peace and settled.

While she still carried the weight of grief over John Murray's death on her heart, since she'd never truly met and gotten to know him, it didn't feel as sharp. She knew that Nathan was grieving for him deeply, and even carried a little bit of guilt for benefitting from his misfortune.

Leona understood, and also admired that in her bridegroom, that he felt so keenly that he wanted to honor his friend's dying wish, and at the same time, fulfill his own longing to have Leona by his side. Leona felt that at long last she was back on the track her life would have taken had it not been for the fire that took her parents from her and sent her and Will on the years' long detour to Ohio. She allowed herself a brief moment of sadness that her parents could not be there to share her wedding day, then reflected on current events.

In spite of the tragedy that took the sheriff's life, something happy had come of it. Nathan Carell would be a good husband to her, of that she was certain. He'd always treated her as a treasure, and she was looking forward to being cherished by him now and always.

Leona took a deep breath, and with shaking hands brushed out her wavy tresses again and on the final attempt was able to pull part of her hair up and center the circlet of flowers, pinning it securely to her hair. She was satisfied that it was the best hairdressing job she could do without assistance and turned to make sure her bodice was straight.

Will appeared in the doorway to see her smiling wistfully as she stood and regarded her reflection. She looked stunning in her gown. He felt a twinge of heartbreak that she would be leaving him. He'd centered his life around hers for so long; it was going to be a big change for him. It meant freedom to live his own life, but, he expected to be a bit lonely without Leona by his side. He was glad, however, that she would be living nearby on the homestead once the houses were built.

"Are you quite sure you want to go through with this? You hardly know the man," Will questioned her seriously. "This is your last chance."

Leona stood up straight and looked her brother in the eye.

“Sure? Yes,” she said out loud, firmly and clearly.

Will could see that she was resolute in her intention to go through with it. He leaned over and kissed her softly on the cheek.

“All I want is your happiness,” he whispered, taking her hand and placing it on his arm. Leona gathered up her train and her bouquet of pink roses and went along with her brother as he escorted her to the foyer doors where her bridegroom awaited them inside the tiny sanctuary of the church.

Leona’s thoughts went back in time while they waited for the doors to open. Back to the child that Nathan used to be; how he had always been a friend and protector to her. He’d brought her bunches of wildflowers he’d picked on many occasions and even walked with her in town nearest the road, putting her next to him on the inside for cleanliness and safety, a young boy playing the gallant gentleman. She thought fondly of the time he’d bandaged her knee when she was a child. He had almost cried because she’d been crying so hard, but he

wanted to impress her so he'd suppressed his tears and acted the way he'd imagined the doctor might act. He'd scolded her imperiously for being careless, while he'd plastered her scraped knee.

Nathan had always shown her such kindness and care. It struck her suddenly what a gift it was that she could be reunited with her childhood friend and marry him to live a life of that same kindness, love, and care for the rest of her days.

Leona locked eyes with Nathan as she approached the altar. She had at first kept her eyes downcast so she wouldn't trip on her gown, but as she raised her gaze, she felt a thrilling, almost electrical connection to the man standing before the altar waiting for her. He looked so intense that she had a moment of doubt, but as Will placed her hand into Nathan's she was suddenly more certain than she'd ever been of anything in her entire life.

She wanted to marry Nathan Carell.

She took her place in front of him, her eyes never leaving his, and listened to the words that would change her life forever.

The minister read from the Holy Book and gave the couple advice on a godly marriage; then it was time for them to exchange their vows.

“Nathan Carell, I understand you’ve chosen to speak your own vows, today?” The minister’s tone betrayed that he wasn’t in favor of bridegrooms making up their own vows, but, since Nathan Carell was not one of his parishioners, he had no authority to deny him.

“You may proceed, young man,” he declared and looked at Nathan intently.

“Leona, I will say all the same words as a traditional marriage ceremony, but beyond promising to love you and cherish you all the days of my life, I give you my vow to always protect you and keep you safe.” Nathan’s voice was husky and gruff.

He cleared his throat and swallowed hard, fighting the emotion that threatened to overtake him. “Leona, I promise to listen to you even if you cannot speak, and I also promise to be a good enough

husband to you that you will be able to heal and to fully recover your ability to speak. I pledge this to you."

Nathan's eyes were full of tears as he placed his mother's simple gold wedding band on Leona's finger. Her green eyes shone as the ring fit perfectly, sliding right into place on her slender ring finger.

"Leona Grove, do you promise to love, honor, cherish and obey your husband, taking no other man before him, in sickness and in health until death do you part?" The minister's voice was cracking with emotion. Nathan's vows had been unexpectedly heartfelt and loving.

Leona nodded, the unshed tears shining in her eyes. "Yes I do. I promise to love and cherish you too." She spoke clearly and slowly, relishing the sound and the feel of the words in her mouth.

Nathan's joy at hearing her speak the sacred vows was evident. He was beaming a smile that lit up the entire church, and warmed Leona to the core. Even Will, standing next to Nathan quivered, feeling quite emotional and choked up at the sound of his sister's

wedding vows. He truly wanted his sister to be happy, and it seemed that she would be with Nathan Carell.

The minister gave a small speech about the responsibilities of the husband and the wife in marriage, and then prayed for the newlywed couple. Having said their amens and affirmations, he said his final words. “I now pronounce you man and wife. What God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.”

Nathan squeezed Leona’s hands and pulled her to him. They embraced for a long moment, and then pulled back, looking deeply into each other’s eyes.

“Mrs. Carell.” Nathan liked the sound of those words almost as much as he had the vows that Leona had spoken only a moment ago. He leaned in then, and kissed his bride sweetly on her soft lips, lingering there for just a moment. How sweet her lips tasted to him, and how elated he was feeling. So light, as if they both could just simply float away.

Chapter 10

Married life began for Leona and Nathan Carell as if in a wonderful, sweet dream. They spent their wedding night in the quaint, tiny boarding house where Nathan had rented them a suite of rooms before the wedding.

It was a blissful wedding night shared between the two, a time of discovery and shared feelings. They both felt everything was so right, and by the time the night was over, and they shared the sunrise together, they knew beyond a doubt that they had made the right choice in getting married.

They didn't speak much; but then, newlyweds rarely do. They shared a special and passionate language of love that had them both feeling happy and close as they prepared to make the short journey out to their land at the top of the canyon.

They spent the second night after the wedding back at the Carell cabin in the mountains. Nathan wanted to organize and set the cabin to rights for his father's return. He sent a cable to Nevada to inquire as to the dates that Milton would be traveling home and to apprise him

of his new marital status. He felt it would soften the blow to give him a head's up. He had not yet received a reply.

Will had gotten hired at the law firm in Hunter Springs. This fortunate opportunity occurred because one of the junior partners had gotten himself into some kind of a scandal that the firm quickly hushed up, before relocating the man to another post. Will had brought from Akron all the letters of introduction and character references to easily win the open position in the firm. His dedication to the law had been a source of pride at his previous place of employment.

For the moment, Will, too, had remained at the Carells' cabin, so it made sense that Nathan and Leona spend most of their time there as well. Since Nathan didn't know when Milton Carell would return, he thought it important to have everything at the ready for his arrival. Will had expressed his desire to rent a room in town, to put him closer to his place of employment, and informed them he would be making arrangements at the hotel in Hunter Springs.

After the day of cleaning and organizing the cabin and re-

stocking the food stores that the Groves had helped to deplete during their three week stay, the newlyweds decided to remain there overnight, and go back into town the following day.

Will was tired from his efforts in hauling firewood and admitted he was far more of a “city slicker” than a mountain man.

“Admit it, Will, you’ve always been more studious than industrious,” Nathan teased. He appreciated the effort his brother-in-law was willing to expend simply to please his sister.

“We surely appreciate your help. I think Pa’s going to be very happy to have the cabin looking so good. It hasn’t had a woman’s touch since Mama died.” Nathan looked solemn for a moment.

Leona came over and took his hand, kissing him on his cheek. The kiss turned a bit more intimate, as kisses are wont to do, and suddenly they jumped apart at the sound of Will clearing his throat loudly.

The newlyweds blushed, and Will had a stern look on his face

that quickly turned to a smile. He couldn't be cross when Leona was so happy.

"I sure don't need to see that," he intoned. Leona punched him playfully on the arm and skipped off to get clothes off the line and bring the rugs back inside.

Nathan looked a bit sheepish, but his feelings for Leona were written all over his face. He stretched and yawned. "I sure am tired from all this work. I think working in the office has me turning into a 'city slicker' too!" he joked. Will shot him an amused glance and said nothing.

Nathan made sure that everything was exactly as his father wanted it and noted the few feminine touches such as a vase of wildflowers in the center of the table and the newly washed and hung curtains on the freshly scrubbed windows. He was proud of all of them for the good work they had done, but especially proud of Leona who had shown him throughout the day what kind of a homemaker she was. He was certainly looking forward to being able to set up their new home exactly the way he'd always planned.

With the rest of the after-dinner chores completed, and Nathan helping to dry and put away the dishes, dusk came and was almost gone. Slowly, they put out the lamps and retired.

When Nathan awoke the next morning, he could smell coffee brewing in the kitchen. He found Leona preparing breakfast and Will already seated at the table enjoying his newspaper with a cup of coffee freshly delivered to him.

“My, my, I can sure get used to this. Sorry, Will, all the comforts you’ve been used to are now to be mine. I pity you, young man,” Nathan teased, but Will had a serious look as he concentrated on the paper.

Nathan thought he might have crossed a line in teasing his brother-in-law on the subject of losing his sister’s companionship and the benefits of her homemaking and cooking skills.

Nathan handed Leona her own cup of coffee and kissed her gently on the cheek.

“Good morning.” Leona smiled and kissed him back.

They heard Will’s chair scrape back and saw him retreat into the bedroom. It was time for both men to get ready for the day. Nathan wolfed down the breakfast that Leona laid before him and mumbled a mouthful of thanks as he went to finish dressing.

He came back to find Leona standing, staring out the kitchen window as she had before. He wondered what she was thinking, but figured she’d tell him when she was ready.

“Are you happy to be back here, Leona?” Nathan had a hard time reading her expression.

Leona turned to him with a look of love in her eyes, then those green eyes turned sad. She shrugged a gesture of yes/no, and he understood what she meant. This place held so many memories here for both of them and the positive and negative walked hand in hand as they had done when they were children.

Nathan couldn't help but wonder about her speech problem. Selective mutism often resolved itself, and he wondered if Leona would ever heal enough to speak.

He asked her gently. "Do you ever think you'll start talking more? I don't mean to be indelicate, but I wanted to know, and guessed I should just ask you," he stated matter-of-factly.

Leona looked surprised at Nathan's question. She didn't answer right away. She cleared the plates and coffee mugs from the table and turned back to the sink. She picked up a plate to wash, then paused.

"I want to Nathan," she said softly. "After being this way for so long, it's hard for me to find my voice now."

Nathan took that information in and pondered for a moment.

"What's keeping you from speaking now? Do you think it's fear?" He wasn't sure what questions to ask.

Leona's face was impassive as she came to the table and sat down

facing him.

“I suppose it is, Nathan. I have gotten used to being the way I am.” Leona struggled with the words. “It’s difficult to break the habit of staying silent. For you I will, though, if it means so much to you. I will speak to you, Nathan.”

Nathan took her hands in his and dropped his head to plant a kiss on them.

“I want you to do what feels best for you. Truly, I do,” Nathan reassured her. “What if we start slowly and you can kind of ease back into it? I mean, you can just talk with me when we’re alone, and see how that goes?” Leona’s face lit up.

Nathan was impressed that she’d spoken so many words at once. He knew that was a big ordeal for her. He wanted to say more but was interrupted by Will bustling out of his room, ready to go out the door.

“See you later, sis, Nathan. I’m going to go into work. Don’t laze around all day, you two. Nathan’s got a mine to run so we can afford

to build our houses."

They chuckled as Leona sent her brother out the door with a kiss on his cheek.

Nathan helped Leona finish up with the breakfast dishes and they packed up their belongings, fed the chickens and dog and took their leisurely time walking down the winding canyon road into Hunter Springs to begin their day. Nathan dropped Leona off at the boarding house with their clothes and a small bundle of Nathan's things from his room at the cabin.

"Your lunch, Nathan," Leona said to him as he prepared to leave for the office. Nathan stopped short at the sound of her voice. Today it sounded stronger and somehow different.

"Put it in the ice chest there," he instructed. "You're so close that I can come have lunch with you today. Better than eating in that stuffy old office."

Leona's eyes lit up at Nathan's words. She smiled broadly and

threw her arms around his neck.

“I will see you for lunch.” She kissed him sweetly, then disengaged his arms and practically pushed him out the door when she realized all he wanted to do was stand there and kiss her.

“Go,” she commanded with a shove.

Nathan went in for another quick kiss, then allowed his wife to push him out the door.

He smiled warmly at the landlady as he passed her in the hallway.

“Good morning, Mrs. Drake,” he said pleasantly as he made his way to the staircase.

“Good morning Mr. Carell,” she replied with a wave and a knowing look on her face.

Well, there is a man head over heels in love if I’ve ever seen one, she

observed.

Chapter 11

Will Grove and the newlywed couple quickly found their new routine between work and home life. Leona took to spending the weekdays in the rooms in town, setting up their suite of rooms to make them comfortable and homey, while other evenings, they spent at the Carell homestead in the canyon.

The date for the return of Milton Carell was a mystery, but the animals still needed care, so they leased a few horses to make the trip back and forth easier. They arranged to stable them at the livery in town. The week quickly passed. By Saturday morning, the three were back once again at the Carell cabin for the weekend.

Leona and Nathan were communicating better and better as they spent more time together. They jealously guarded their time alone to spend working on communication in both directions. Leona taught Nathan more American Sign Language so that he could be included in her conversations with Will, and they practiced that daily.

Nathan was not always a good student, causing some of their teaching sessions to degenerate. Sometimes they morphed into love-

play, and other times into serious talk. When either of them became frustrated, they would simply get up and walk away for a few minutes, get a drink or a bit of air, then come back and try again. They were both quite determined to be the best at communicating that they could be, whether that meant sign language or actual spoken words.

One thing was certain: they understood each other's body language, facial expressions and looks of longing better and better each day.

When they were home alone together—doing chores, getting ready for bed, or just being together-- Leona made more of an effort to speak, her voice becoming stronger even after a few days of practice. The words were becoming more familiar and easier for her to reach. She even began to think more in terms of words than gestures.

More importantly, she was feeling braver about saying what was in her heart; those were things that were not only difficult to articulate in gestures, but also things she tended to keep from Will. But sharing her deep feelings? Nathan made that easy. He was patient

and loving, and never pushed her. He offered missing words when she felt stuck or frustrated. She knew he only wanted her to heal and feel good about speaking as he had stated in his wedding vows.

"It's all right, Leona," he would say. "The words are there waiting. You'll find them when the time is right. We have all the time in the world to converse."

Leona would shake her head in frustration, clenching her fists and groaning with the difficulty at times.

Nathan would take her hands, rub them, and hold them, looking into her eyes with love. "Just take your time, there might be another way of saying what you're trying to tell me. What is the sign?"

When Leona used the sign, Nathan would play that he didn't know what she meant, then shout it out, excitedly. This would make Leona laugh and feel better instantly.

"It's going to take us a while, darling," Nathan soothed her.

“I know, Nathan, I get tired,” Leona replied. “It shouldn’t be this hard.” She slumped in his arms and let him hold her, drawing strength from his love and support.

“It’s fine, though I fear I may be pushing you too hard to speak. I don’t want you to feel pressured. I know it’s difficult for you, but I am hopeful that it will get easier. I want you to tell me if you think it’s too much for you to take. Promise me you’ll do that, won’t you?” Nathan was so caring and serious that it touched Leona’s heart and brought tears to her eyes.

“I promise,” she said aloud. “I will tell you. Let’s stop now?”

The effort Leona had expended had tired her mind so that she didn’t want to speak anymore that night. Nathan agreed and they went back to signing until the following morning when they woke up and even then, Nathan didn’t engage Leona in anything serious or topics that required her to use a lot of words.

Leona was quickly realizing that not only did it make her husband happy to have her conversing out loud, but it also made

communication between the newlywed couple abundantly clear. Conversations took far less time to convey an idea than through signs and facial expressions. It still took Nathan awhile to decode her expressions and gestures, but he was so in tune with her, so in love with her, that he was patient and attentive no matter what. Overall, they were growing closer and more compatible with every passing day. They had long conversations discussing their plans and dreams.

Leona mused about the recent positive changes in her life as she finished hanging out the laundry. She took a look around the homestead, spying Nathan working in the garden. The sight of her husband, toiling on his land, soon to be their land, she reckoned, warmed her heart. He was a good man. Leona decided that she was feeling pretty happy and thought her husband was too. All signs pointed to them having a close and loving relationship.

Yet, still in the back of her mind was the constant, nagging worry about the return of Milton Carell; since Nathan had not received any word from him, she decided to try to put it out of her mind, but the concern was still present. They had their rooms to go home to when the time came, and she felt secure about that.

She stood and watched her husband for a while, then took the laundry basket to the porch and went inside. She got a pitcher of lemonade out of the ice box and made a mental reminder to order more ice from the ice man.

Taking a glass to her brother, who sat studying by the window, she sat down near him. Will looked up and smiled at his sister who was practically glowing with happiness.

“My first case,” he announced. “I am preparing to go to court next week. Thanks for the drink. What are you doing?”

“Laundry and taking this to Nathan,” she answered, laughing as his eyes registered surprise at the sound of her voice. “I’m really trying to talk more.” She smiled, patting his shoulder as she got up to leave.

“Happy for you, sis,” Will said, and he meant it. Even though he was aware he should by now have a relationship of his own with a good girl, he had kept his focus on Leona and his work, a combination

which left little room for anything else in his life.

Leona nodded and turned away. Will turned back to his study as she left the room, smiling to himself inwardly, then focusing back on the workload before him.

When Leona walked outside, she saw Nathan was still digging in the garden field at the bottom of the hill. Leona saw him stand and wipe the sweat off his brow and throat with his bandana. He didn't see her as she approached. He bent back to his work with the hoe and was somewhat startled when he caught movement out of the corner of his eye. His face lit up with a beaming smile when he saw his wife, and carrying lemonade to him, no less!

A man could definitely get used to this, he thought. Then, to Leona, "Hello, wife," smiling lovingly as she handed him the lemonade. He downed the sweet drink in a few gulps, handing her the empty glass.

"Thank you," he said breathlessly. The cold had been a shock to his body. It sure felt good.

“I’ll help,” Leona stated, setting the glass to the side and rolling up her sleeves. “Do you do all this alone?” she asked. She didn’t think old Mr. Carell did any of the work on the place. She knew he was elderly and a bit infirm recently.

“Yep,” Nathan affirmed. “You don’t have to help me, but I’d like it if you would stay with me.”

“I can help you.” Leona was adamant. She picked up a rake and began to work beside him.

In that moment–watching her break out from her own chores to help him outside—Nathan’s heart was full of love and admiration for this beautiful woman who was willing to toil by his side.

Nathan dug the weeds and Leona raked them, putting them into a pail, dumping them at last into a wheelbarrow. With Leona’s help, the job went fairly quickly. They soon fell into a rhythm and talked a little while they worked.

Nathan had found over the week since the wedding that there

was always more to learn about his new wife. He felt like he could sit and talk with her forever and never uncover all the beautiful mystery that was Leona. While they could never learn all about each other in one afternoon, even the silences between them as they worked were comfortable.

"This will be planted in corn here, and beans, there," he explained, pointing to the plot of land that was to be planted. "Did you grow a garden in Ohio?"

Leona smiled. "I like flowers. Yes."

"No vegetables?" Nathan asked, he chuckled. "You can't eat flowers!" he teased her.

Leona stood and looked him in the eye, "Yes, you *can*." It was her turn to chuckle, and Nathan loved the sound of it. "They just won't taste quite as good as corn or beans, perhaps," she added, giggling.

"We didn't," she continued.

Nathan looked at her with a puzzled expression. “Didn’t what?”

“Eat flowers, silly!”

Nathan roared with laughter and realized his bride was flirting with him easily, her words within her grasp and her sense of joy and humor becoming ever more apparent.

“Well, we’re about done here, I’d say.” Nathan stretched and made use of his bandana to wipe his face. “What do you say we haul this back in and get washed up?”

Leona nodded and grabbed the empty lemonade glass, placed it in the pail and picked up the rake. Nathan took the handles of the wheelbarrow and together they headed up the hill towards the cabin.

When they reached the crest of the hill, Leona paused and looked out over the ruins of the Grove farm. She sighed, her expression wistful. Nathan stopped and came back to where she was standing. They stood for a while looking out over the land, each lost in their

own thoughts.

Nathan reached out and encircled her with his muscular arm, drawing her close to him. She could feel his heat and smell the manly musk of him. As his grip tightened, she let herself melt into the feeling of being loved and protected. She knew that her husband Nathan Carell was going to be her safe harbor and the rock she could stand on from now and forever.

Chapter 12

Sunday, a week after the wedding, the men went out to the ruins of the Grove home across the road. They had been working since sunup, clearing debris, burning brush, and assessing the foundation of the home.

Will was hoping that he could rebuild on the same foundation. Once that was determined, they were going to walk the land and decide on the positioning of Nathan and Leona's house. Will wanted them close by, still feeling protective of his little sister; but he understood that a married couple would want to have their own private location a distance away from the main house.

It was nearing the noon hour when Leona came over, bearing a picnic basket and a tablecloth. She went to what used to be the front porch landing where Will and Nathan were hammering in planks and repairing the treads on the steps that had miraculously survived the blaze but broke down from being neglected over the years. Leona stood and watched the two men working as a team, and it warmed her heart. They had an easy banter as they worked. They were so intent on their task that they didn't even see her approach, and didn't stop

their work until she called out, “Lunch!”

Both men looked up quickly and seeing the picnic basket and the pitcher of lemonade she had brought over, were more than happy to take a break.

“I’ll just finish this one board,” Nathan said. “Then I’ll eat.”

Leona poured him a drink and walked over to hand it to him. As she stepped over to the worksite, she tripped, stubbing her toe on a brick.

“Ow!” she cried out. Will was at her side in a heartbeat, looking fearfully at her, then glaring at Nathan. He stepped in between Nathan and Leona as Nathan reached out to comfort his wife.

“No, Will,” Leona spoke, shaking her head. She put her hand on her brother’s arm and bid him to step back. “I tripped.”

Will was holding his breath, his fist clenched. “Is that all?”

He glared at Nathan again, puffing his chest and taking an aggressive stance. Nathan had a look of disbelief on his face.

“What is wrong with you?” he asked Leona’s brother. “Do you think I did something to Leona?”

Will stepped back. “I need to take a walk.” He huffed, turned on his heel and quickly strode away from Nathan and Leona.

“What in the world was that about? Oh, are you all right? Here, sit.” Nathan led Leona over to a short garden wall. “Is your foot all right?” Leona nodded, taking his hand, and the two sat together on the rough stone wall.

“Will still doesn’t trust you. He’s so protective of me. I’m sorry,” Leona told him haltingly, her voice full of emotion. “That was wrong, what he just did. I know that, if he had a wife of his own to deeply care for him, he wouldn’t act as coldly toward you.”

Nathan thought for a moment and looked into Leona’s sad eyes. He was still trying to decide how to react to this news. “Trust me? Do

you trust me, Leona?" Nathan held his breath after he asked her, not sure what to expect.

Leona brightened at the question. "Oh! Yes," she said breathlessly. "I do. I trust you." She squeezed Nathan's hand as she sprang to her feet, wincing slightly at her sore toe.

Nathan blew out the breath he'd been holding and stood up with his wife. "I'm so glad." He added, "I want you to know you can always count on me. Now to convince your brother…"

Nathan shook his head, still reeling from Will's over-the-top reaction. "Let's go get some lunch, shall we?" he suggested. Leona nodded emphatically. Together, they walked hand in hand back to where the picnic was waiting.

Will was nowhere in sight, so Leona and Nathan enjoyed their sandwiches in the shade of a big oak mostly in companionable silence.

Will came back after a few minutes and stood solemnly before the couple, who were enjoying their rest. He didn't speak at first,

shuffling his feet awkwardly. Nathan waited for a beat, and when Will didn't say anything, reached into the basket and grabbed a sandwich.

"Here you go." He tossed the sandwich in Will's direction. "Have a seat. It's ham, and it's delicious, thanks to my talented wife."

Will cleared his throat for a moment, and then, seeing the expression on his sister's face, decided he should say something. "I guess I owe you an apology, Carell. I overreacted when I heard Leona cry out. I know it wasn't you, and I reckon I have to learn how not to be so protective of my sister. She's your responsibility now, not mine. I believe you'll do right by her."

His speech completed, Will sat down next to Leona and began to devour his lunch.

Nathan had his mouth full of food when Will concluded his speech, so he didn't answer right away.

When he had swallowed, he wiped his mouth and his hands with a napkin and stuck out a hand to Will in a gesture of friendship. "I'm

sure this isn't an easy adjustment for you, Will. You can trust your sister with me. I will protect her as well as you ever did. Maybe better! She's got nothing to fear from me and neither do you."

Will looked sheepish as he took Nathan's proffered hand. They shook hands and then went back to eating.

After they finished, Nathan suggested they take a walk to find the place to build their home. Leona enthusiastically agreed. She already had a place in mind and couldn't wait to show Nathan.

"I'll stay here and keep working on this foundation," Will announced, picking up his tools and going back to the worksite.

Leona and Nathan left him to his work and excitedly set off in search of a building site for their own place to live. The property was grand, but Nathan could tell that Leona had a particular place in mind. She didn't hesitate to take off in a certain direction.

Leona knew every inch of her family's property. Together, the two of them had explored it as children for hours on end, playing

games of hide and seek, and pretending to be Cowboys and Indians in the deep caverns of the steep canyon walls. Everything about this place was familiar to them both. To Leona, it felt like home.

From the ruin of her family home, Leona turned towards the orchard. She took Nathan's hand and led him through the apple trees that were in dire need of pruning. At the boundary of the last row of trees she turned down the sloping hill and led her husband to a plateau that sat down the slope from the Grove home, nearly out of sight of where the house once stood.

There was an amazing view looking down through Hunter Springs Canyon. Nathan could feel the breeze on his face as they quietly took in the view. A hawk caught an updraft right in front of them and Leona gasped when the bird soared up out of the canyon and beat its wings over their heads.

"I used to come here when I was a girl," she said softly. "This was my thinking place. I truly love it here."

She sighed, caught up in those childhood memories, the

expression on her face wistful. Nathan squeezed her hand.

"Your memories of living here are not all bad, are they? I remember that you and I had some fun running around in that orchard. Boy! That's going to need some work. I think I'll have to hire a crew." He changed the subject, not wanting his bride to fall into despair.

"Not all bad," she admitted. "Some of the worst, though."

She paused then and walked a distance away, towards the mountain side of the clearing. She bent over to pick a wildflower, smelling it, then tucking it behind her ear. Nathan could tell that she needed to be alone with her memories. She wandered back over to him after a few minutes and slipped her hand into his.

Nathan looked around at where they stood. The parcel of land was large and flat enough to support a home and garden. They would have to build a road around the orchard and down the slope to bring in the building materials. Nathan looked at his wife standing beside him. She had her eyes closed and was smiling sweetly. Clearly, this

place had some kind of connection to her from her early life. He would ask her about that later.

Right now, he had another question for his bride.

“Is this where you want us to build our home?” He already knew the answer, but he wanted to hear her say it.

“Yes, Nathan,” came her reply. “This is where I want to live with you.”

On those words, Nathan drew his wife close and kissed her. They embraced sweetly then looked around the plateau further.

Nathan picked up some rocks that were in a pile at the bottom of the hill. He walked off, carrying a rock, and pacing to count the distance. Placing eight rocks in a rectangular configuration, he then took Leona by the hand. The two walked into the inside of the rectangle and looked around them.

“Welcome home, Mrs. Carell,” Nathan said quietly. “You are

standing in your new home." He gestured widely, showing Leona where the kitchen and the bedrooms would be, and explained the process of starting the build.

"Would you like to see the garden?" he asked.

Leona, playing along with the charade, jumped up and down clapping and smiling.

"Here you go, my lady, mind the step." Nathan made an exaggerated step over an invisible threshold and walked with Leona around to the west side of the home site. He showed her the side yard of the house that got the majority of the day's sunshine, where she could plant her garden.

Leona's mind was reeling. She could visualize everything Nathan was saying, and she could not wait to begin building their home and garden together.

For the first time in an awfully long time, she felt hopeful and excited for what would come next.

Chapter 13

With the plans for the home building project and general clean-up and removal of debris on the Grove property, Will's time was split between his work at the law office and supervising the workmen at his place. This left Leona and Nathan on their own most of the time. Will had moved into his room at the Hunter Springs Hotel and was planning a one-room cabin at the worksite so he could supervise the building through the summer. The space had been cleared, and work was to begin on the cabin that very week.

In the days after Leona and Nathan chose the site for building their new home, they began to draw up the plans to show to the builder. They drew and re-drew plans, each time improving the design. This consumed their evenings, and they eagerly cleaned up the dinner dishes so they could lay their paper out on the clean kitchen table and start their dreaming. The plans were nearly complete with only a few details left.

The house would be a large, but modestly designed building. With four bedrooms, a parlor, a dining room, and study. With the availability of the water from the outstanding well, they would also be

including indoor plumbing in the building, so bathrooms and kitchens were being designed with that in mind.

Leona's request was for there to be a large porch in front because they had decided on a home site with an incredible view of the canyon. She dreamed of harvesting vegetables from her garden and sitting on that porch in the afternoons shelling peas or shucking corn while enjoying the view. Her imagination also had her and Nathan in matching rocking chairs on that porch in their dotage. She laughed at herself for these visions, reminding herself that they'd only just begun their lives together, and had many years to enjoy the view.

Nathan was busily planning the infrastructure of the buildings, how to bring water to the garden and tap into the well to bring gravity-fed water down the hillside to their home. While he was at it, he drew up additional plans to update the irrigation for the orchard and the fields beyond. He knew he was investing his time and effort in the Grove homestead and not his own, well, his father's, land. However, this was his wife's legacy, and he wanted the home that they built together to be safe, well-built, and made to last for generations.

Leona finished the dinner clean up and was wiping down the kitchen shelves when she came upon a strange discovery. A book was wedged in between cutting boards and a stack of plates on the upper shelf. Leona was puzzled at the placement of the novel. She pulled it out and looked at the strange illustration on the cover. “The Wonderful Wizard of Oz” it read.

“Nathan? Do you know this book?”

Nathan looked up from his house plans as Leona brought it over to the kitchen table.

“I do!” he exclaimed, then his face fell. “This was my mama’s favorite story.” He was suddenly overcome with a deep, almost painful nostalgia, missing his mother’s voice, her laugh, and how she would read aloud to young Nathan passages from her favorite books.

Suddenly, he stood up and grasped Leona by the hand, pulling her with him to the living room. Eagerly, he seated her in the comfortable armchair. He brought up the ottoman near her feet,

positioned himself comfortably, kicking off his boots. Then he took the book from her hands and began to read.

A few minutes into the reading, Leona found herself drawn into the story by the sound of Nathan's voice. It was easy to recognize that Nathan knew the story by heart. He clearly had memorized the book over years of being read to by his mother.

Leona watched her husband as he relaxed into the narrative, looking happy, with a sweet smile as he voiced the characters. She felt honored to be drawn into his world and felt connected to him in a whole new way. She, too, was lulled into a happy feeling as she watched Nathan travel back in time to being that young boy being read to by his mother. She loved the excitement in his eyes and the way his hair fell across his forehead.

He's quite handsome, she thought. *How sweet his demeanor is as he reads.*

Will had asked her a few days before about how she was feeling being back in Hunter Springs, with the people who were there when

her parents died, who let them die in the fire. Her brother was still bitter to this day and had always felt that more might have been done to save their parents. There was no room for anger in Leona's heart. She was filling it up with love for her present and future home and with love for her new life in Hunter Springs with her husband. She believed that the storm had killed her parents, and how could you be angry at a storm?

Leona wasn't sure that anything more heroic could have been done to save her parents' lives, and her mind still didn't like to go too deeply into the events of that tragic day. She would go back in her memory to the night disaster struck, and sometimes her dreams smelled of ash and smoke. It was a fragmented story, out of order, but she never could see the part where her parents perished, only flashes of being treated for her burns in the surgeon's office. She looked down and rubbed her arm where the evidence of that horrible night still lived with her. She wasn't sorry that she didn't recall the worst of the event. She didn't blame anyone–as Will seemed to–and sitting there looking at her husband, she couldn't believe that anyone who could disappear into a book like that could possibly be a bad person. She didn't blame Nathan at all.

Nathan allowed himself to be caught up in the story as he read, remembering each line with certainty as he read through the first few chapters. He told the comedic parts with laughter in his voice and the drama with a hushed gravitas that kept Leona's attention riveted.

Unconsciously, he reached out and took Leona's hand as he told the story, his thumb caressing her knuckles and his grip tightening as the story became more dramatic. His voice became more animated, his face flushed with excitement.

Then, as if a switch flipped, Nathan stopped reading to the end of the passage and abruptly closed the book, still holding onto Leona's hand.

"I guess time got away from me, I apologize. It's getting late, you must be tired." Nathan yawned and rubbed his eyes. "I guess I am, too."

"Please don't apologize," Leona begged. "I enjoyed it so much, and you read so well. I think it's wonderful and sweet that your

mother used to read to you. I want to hear the rest of the story now," she told him. "Will you keep reading to me a few chapters every night?"

Nathan was surprised at the volume of words Leona spoke to him and smiled to himself. She was healing and feeling more comfortable to speak when she was around him. Her words came more quickly, and she was increasingly able to express herself verbally with alacrity. He was continually impressed by her ability and eloquence. He always knew she was truly beautiful and had a sweet spirit, but now he also knew that she possessed a keen intellect and a gift for conversation.

Nathan quickly agreed to her request because, as he already knew, he could never refuse her anything.

"Of course I would be happy to read to you. I love this story. I always got scared at the dramatic parts when I was a boy, but I would pester my mother to read more to me, because I wanted to hear the ending, and all about the magic land of Oz. I always wanted to believe there was magic in the world, and now that you're here again, I think I do."

Nathan looked intently into Leona's eyes, and she suddenly understood his meaning.

It had to be more than mere happenstance that they had been reunited. Nathan had longed for her during the years she'd been away just as she'd longed for him during those long, lonely, years in Ohio, never dreaming they would one day, through a second tragedy, come back together again. Perhaps it was a kind of magic that had brought them here. She couldn't name it, but she felt it as sure as she was sitting there. As long as there was no other tragedy on the horizon, she would be happy to call it providence, or fate, or even, like in "The Wizard of Oz", magic.

If Nathan wanted to call it magic, she would not argue with him. Being with him did feel magical and carried with it a hope for a safe and happy future. Something she'd never dared dream of when she was in Ohio. Only her return home and being reunited with Nathan Carell could have given her that feeling of hope after all the fear and anguish of the past.

Leona thought that a great deal of the magic in the room was from the story Nathan had been reading to her, but it also emanated from the man himself. Nathan Carell believed in the magic that had brought her back into his life. No matter what her brother said, Leona knew that this man was what she needed. This man was all she would ever need. She knew it with her whole heart. She guessed she'd always known it. Sitting there, sharing words and feelings with Nathan now, sharing their future, sharing stories from the past; all of it felt exactly right. Leona had an overwhelming sense of being exactly where she should be in that moment. Nathan's words thrilled her to the core. The love in his eyes was unmistakable. Leona returned it.

As Nathan gazed intensely into Leona's big, expressive eyes, she smiled sweetly, wanting to kiss him. He read the answer in her eyes. No words were needed as their lips met.

Chapter 14

The rebuilding of the Grove's residence had started. Will's cabin was erected by the crew in one day, it being a simple, one-room structure with a window that faced the ruins of the Grove home. Will still used the amenities at the Carell cabin, and took his meals there with Leona and Nathan. His sister always served him graciously and sent him home with extra food for the following day's lunch.

Nathan, too, was gracious. For the first time in his life, he had everything he'd ever wanted. A good job, a place of his own, and of course, Leona.

He had Will's blessing to marry his sister, albeit grudgingly, but interactions between the two men had been easier of late, so Nathan was feeling hopeful about their relationship, too. He planned to maintain harmony with Will Grove. He didn't relish the thought of living on someone else's land with a grudge between them. He'd already witnessed the pain and anguish his father had gone through over the dispute between their two families and he had no desire to let that bad blood between the Groves and Carells continue.

Especially now that the two families had been joined in matrimony.

With his position at the mining office elevated to that of partner, his job demands had changed, but one of Nathan's favorite perks was that his presence was no longer required in the office every weekday. The firm employed clerks and messengers, so that if Nathan was needed, a lad would be dispatched to his rooms in Hunter Springs, or on horseback to the Carell homestead.

He'd just finished mucking out the stalls and bedding them with fresh straw, refilling the water, and feeding the chickens. Leona was standing up near the house, hanging up the clothes on the line, pinning each garment evenly and working with a rhythm that told Nathan she was probably singing as she worked. She didn't notice anything until he walked up the path to the house on horseback, riding Boss, the leased horse from the livery and leading a second horse, Leona's favorite, Blaze.

Leona turned at the sound of the horses' hooves and looked at her husband with a question in her eyes as he stepped down off the

big chestnut gelding, tying both horses to a tree.

"How would you like to go riding with me?" Nathan asked. "I guess you haven't had much time to look over the land since you got back. It's such a nice day. I think you're working too hard and need a break."

Leona laughed at the idea of working too hard. Nathan didn't know how she had toiled in the boarding house scrubbing and ironing for Mrs. Applegate in Ohio. After all, keeping a farm required work, and every able-bodied person worked from sunup to sundown. That was the reality of life in the country.

"Yes!" she agreed. "I need to get ready, give me a few minutes," she said, gesturing to the few items yet to be hung on the line, and her attire, which was not suitable for riding.

Nathan doffed his hat and bowed in her direction. "As you wish, my lady. I'll be waiting for you. Don't take too long."

Leona smiled broadly at her husband; the thought of going riding

with him was exciting. She quickly hung up the three remaining shirts and bustled into the house. Nathan waited by the horses in anticipation.

He was startled when she burst back out the cabin door wearing a pair of dungarees and a homespun shirt that buttoned down the front.

Men's clothing!

He shook his head, then realized how absolutely sensible it was for her to ride in trousers rather than skirts. She always seemed quite ill at ease when riding in dresses, and he understood why. The volume of fabric and petticoats was such that it all had to be carefully tucked to protect modesty, as well as to keep from spooking the horse.

Nathan gave a low whistle when Leona walked towards him. Instead of making her look masculine, the cowboy attire hugged her hips and curves in such a way that Nathan found completely alluring. The townsfolk would probably be shocked, but Nathan knew of more than one ranching family where the women rode astride wearing

dungarees and helped with sorting and branding cattle alongside their menfolk. It wasn't nearly as scandalous as it had once been, yet it still was a rarity.

Nathan resisted the urge to take Leona in his arms and kiss her right there in the yard, and instead, untied the horses, and led Blaze out to assist Leona mounting up. His hands felt her curves and that didn't help him quell his desire, but he restrained himself, settled Leona in the saddle and handed her the reins. Then he stepped up onto Boss' saddle in one smooth movement.

"Ready to go?" he asked Leona, heart swelling at the sight of her thriving.

"Yes!" She nodded emphatically and together they rode down the hill and out towards the fields.

Leona was mostly silent after that, taking in everything Nathan said with interest, meeting his eyes and nodding. She kept her focus mostly on steering her horse through the brush and making sure she kept up with Nathan's horse Boss, who had a much larger stride than

Blaze did. She had to urge him to keep up at times.

After a while, they came to the border of the land. Leona stopped to take in the view. It was obvious that her husband was proud of the Carell land and legacy. She felt a bit of pride, too, knowing that she was a part of it all now, not the daughter of a rival family, but a part of his own family.

Nathan fell silent as they looked around and it was then that Leona began to speak.

“This was all I dreamed about back in Ohio, Nathan,” she began. “Seeing the land like this, coming back to the orchards and the smell of the blossoms in springtime.”

“Why did you and Will leave like that? No one knew if you were even alive,” Nathan asked.

“I was trapped in the fire, Nathan,” she said softly. “I watched my parents die and was helpless to save them.”

A tear made its way down her cheek.

“Will broke down the door and carried me out, but it was already too late for them. I was on fire, and he threw himself upon me to put it out, then pulled me from the house.”

Leona paused, willing her heart to stop pounding. That was the first time she’d spoken of the fire with anyone. She didn’t know if she could continue.

Nathan moved his horse closer and reached out his hand to her. Stroking her arm, he murmured to her, “It’s all right, now.”

The words tasted bitter in the curve of his mouth.

“No, I want to tell you.” Leona cleared her throat and willed her voice to hold out. “We ran away. Will and I just ran until we got close to town, then I guess I collapsed. I don’t remember anything after that until I woke up in the surgery room with the doctor and nurse. Will carried me into the doctor’s and we stayed the night, they kept giving me medicine for the pain.” Leona winced at the memory.

Suddenly, as if the mere recollection was able to set her heart aflame, Leona's eyes went wide. "Oh, Nathan!" Leona choked back a sob. "It hurt so much."

She hiccupped and tried to catch her breath. "We went to my father's friend in Tombstone to help us find our way. Mr. and Mrs. Jacobus took me to a lot of doctors to try to help me find my voice again," she croaked out hoarsely, yet she didn't stop there.

"Then Will learned about the school in Akron, and we booked passage on the train out East, and that is where we stayed until we returned here to Hunter Springs. "

"Where did you get the funds to pay for your passage to Ohio?" Nathan asked. "With everything lost in the fire. I could never figure out how you got away."

Leona took a moment to reply. "My parents had a safety deposit box at the bank," Leona told him. "There was some fine jewelry and the land deeds and bonds." Leona paused for a breath. Nathan waited,

knowing there was more to the story.

"Mrs. Jacobus took us into the bank, and we got the contents of the safety deposit box, and while we were there, we met Mrs. Dancher, you remember her?" Nathan nodded at that.

"She expressed interest in purchasing a necklace of my mother's. One that she'd admired, a diamond and sapphire pendant. Will and I agreed to sell it to pay our way out to Ohio. We left the bank in Hunter Springs and went straight to the train station in Tombstone and bought our tickets. We purchased some essentials and luggage. We had only the few items that we'd gotten after we got to the Jacobus'. Will had a suit of clothes, and I had two dresses and some underthings. Two days later we were on our way to Ohio, and, well, I guess you know the rest."

Leona finished her story, looking intently at Nathan for some reaction. He met her gaze steadily, while inside his heart was breaking for what she had endured. He would have given anything to spare her that pain.

“I guess we’d better head back home. Will’s probably wondering what’s become of us.”

Pausing just a moment, he added, “It means a lot to me that you told me your story. I want to thank you for that.”

Leona nodded agreement, clearly finished with speaking for the moment. Nathan certainly didn’t blame her. That was a big story and she had told it in great detail. He thought that, to date, it was probably the most his wife had spoken since she’d arrived in Arizona.

They rode off in silence.

Nathan felt sad about Leona’s story but at first, he couldn’t put his finger on what seemed a little bit off about it. As they rode, the shadows lengthening in the afternoon sky, he admired the clouds and the way the blue of the sky was just like the sapphire Leona described in her mother’s necklace.

That was it!

Why was it that Judy Dancher never told anyone that she had met the Grove children that day in the bank? Why had she never said she had purchased a necklace and given the children the means to leave Arizona and go to Ohio?

Chapter 15

Nathan came in from the fields Sunday night, a couple of days after the ride and Leona's revealing story about how she and Will fled the fire and made their way to Ohio. He found his wife in the kitchen preparing dinner, humming and dancing to a tune in her head, blissfully unaware of his presence. He stood in the doorway watching her for a long moment, then came up behind her and took her arm. Leona startled, but when she saw it was him, tilted her head back and laughed out loud. The sound was music to Nathan's ears, and he thought he wanted to be the one to make her laugh every day from now on.

With an exaggerated bow he took her in his arms and began to waltz her around the small kitchen. Somehow, they managed to avoid crashing into the chairs and table. The feeling between them was as light and fun as it had ever been, and Nathan felt like a schoolboy again, filled with love and longing for Leona.

They had just reversed their waltz and were looping around again when Nathan stubbed his toe on the chair leg, which sent them both into paroxysms of laughter.

Nathan played it up by saying, “Owowowow!” and hopping around on one foot, keeping in time with the music they’d been humming. He played it so comically, that Leona was practically falling down, she was laughing so hard. Their laughter escalated until they were clutching their sides and crying.

They were both doubled over trying to catch their breath when Will came in. Seeing them both laughing until they wept and the smile and flush on Leona’s face, her eyes sparkling with joy, made him laugh as well. The joy was infectious, and he caught it.

When Leona saw her brother, she got serious for a moment. “Hello, Will,” she gasped still trying to recover her wind. “Dinner’s almost ready.”

She mistakenly looked at Nathan who had an eyebrow raised and a smirk on his face and fell again into peals of laughter.

“Come in, Will, let’s go get a drink and let my wife calm herself. She is practically giddy!” he joked, then planted a sloppy kiss on his

wife's cheek. "Get that dinner on the table, Wife! The menfolk are hungry."

Nathan ducked as Leona swung at him with the soup ladle and shooed them both out of the kitchen still weeping with laughter.

Nathan poured two fingers of whiskey for himself and his brother-in-law. They sat down and the conversation soon got serious. They began to discuss the progress of the building projects and a court case regarding water rights that Will was following.

Leona went back to preparing the meal, taking the bread out of the oven where it was warming and buttering thick slices to go with the beef and barley soup she'd prepared. Her hands had become accustomed to preparing food. She enjoyed baking bread and putting her hand to trying new recipes. She had learned quickly enough, coming back from Ohio, that people ate vastly different cuisine in Arizona than they did back East.

She had begun to experiment, trying recipes found in the Carell kitchen. The late Mrs. Carell had been diligent about writing down

recipes, and she had some that had clearly been handed down from mother to daughter for generations. Nathan didn't know it, but one of those recipes was a dessert recipe that she'd run across cleaning the kitchen and had gathered the ingredients for. It was a strawberry tart, and she had just placed it in the oven when she'd removed the bread right before Nathan came in.

She enjoyed listening to her brother and husband talk, the rhythms and cadence of their voices, raised tones when they became excited or passionate about a point they were discussing, and the low serious tone of her husband as he made a particular point. She never tired of hearing Nathan's voice, whether it was overhearing him in conversation, when he read to her at night, or the love talk he softly spoke to her when they were alone. Now with Will coming around to liking Nathan more and more, she was enjoying listening to them together. For the first time since they came back to Hunter Springs, Leona was feeling a sense of peace and harmony about her new husband's relationship with her brother.

Will, for his part, had become a little more easygoing. Leona thought that it had to do with how Nathan treated her, and how

obviously happy they were as a couple. Will had lost some of that hard, protective edge that he'd maintained all the years they were in Ohio. Now, his mind was at ease about her happiness.

Leona ladled out the soup and placed the bowls on the table.

"Dinner is ready, boys," she called out. "Will, do you want bread?"

Silence was all she received from her brother; Leona looked over her shoulder.

Will got up out of the chair to come in. Instead of taking his usual place at the table he came over to his sister's side and put his arm around her shoulders. "You know, it's pretty wonderful to hear you talk so much now. I never believed you would. Not like this," he clarified. "It makes me very happy."

Nathan smiled as he entered the kitchen, overhearing what Will said, and seeing the effect on Leona. She hadn't realized until now that not speaking had a real effect on Will too. He'd been the best sort

of a friend and brother, Nathan realized. He'd accepted her and not tried to change her. Now that she was changing on her own, he was just as supportive and accepting. Leona gave him a big hug, then told them both to sit down, and the spell was broken.

As the meal progressed, the two men continued their small talk about the home building project, then Nathan changed the subject. "I've got quite a lot of work to do in that east field. I've got the majority of it tilled, but I need to finish that this week and get the rows ready for seeding. If I wait too long we won't have enough time for them to grow to harvest. The growing season is short up here in the mountains, as you surely know."

"I really don't," Will admitted. "Don't forget that I'm the studious one." He laughed and took a sip of his drink. "I never was privy to all the ranching stuff with my father. He had employees who worked the land, I wasn't hands-on like you are. However, if you need some help, I can come Wednesday after work and help you. I should be out of court by one in the afternoon. That gives us plenty of time to get it done," Will offered.

Nathan and Leona shared a surprised look between them; Will was oblivious, digging into his soup.

"That would be real nice, Will," Nathan agreed. "I could sure use some help. Maybe if we get that done, we can go over the plans and get ready to order the pipe for the irrigation and gravity feed for our place. I think the crew should be finished with refreshing the well by Friday and maybe next weekend they'll be finished with the pruning and clean up out in the orchard."

Will nodded and went back to his meal. Nathan smiled to himself and dug into his own meal.

"This is delicious, Leona. I've never tasted such flavorful soup, and the bread is really good." Leona smiled and blushed a little. She didn't say anything.

Nathan loved to see the pleased expression on his wife's face when he complimented her. He knew she had worked quite hard learning cooking techniques so that she could prepare meals that he would like. It pleased him that she cared so much about learning

housekeeping simply for him.

What a remarkable woman, he thought. *I'm a fortunate man, indeed*.

The two men continued to make plans and talked about their individual and joint ventures between the two properties. Leona ate silently, watching and listening to her brother and husband, taking it all in. For the first time in a very long time, she had no worries and felt no anxiety about anything. She felt safe, loved, and protected. The two men she'd loved most in life, aside from her father, were sitting in the room with her enjoying a dinner that she'd prepared, and they were talking and planning for their collective future. From Leona's perspective, it simply did not get any better than that.

When the meal ended, Leona got up and cleared the dishes. The men started to rise from the table, but Leona told them to sit back down.

"I have a surprise for dessert," she announced. She then proceeded to serve the strawberry tart with cream and coffee.

As soon as Nathan smelled the dessert, he knew with certainty that it was his mother's recipe. He'd eaten her strawberry tart all his life. The smell made his mouth water.

"You're in for a treat," he told Will. "This is my mother's strawberry tart." Then, looking at his wife, he added, "Leona, however did you manage it?" Then he pushed his fork into the tart and took a bite. The look that passed over his face was enough to tell Leona that she'd done everything right.

"I followed the recipe," she replied. "I'm glad you're pleased."

Leona then looked to Will who had said nothing, watching the exchange between his sister and her husband.

He, too, took a bite and his expression was one of definite approval. "Now how come you didn't learn to cook for me this well in Ohio?" he asked her with mock seriousness.

"All the best ingredients are here," Leona answered, looking

lovingly at her husband. That's all she had to say on the matter.

Chapter 16

Three days later, Nathan and Leona met at the boarding house after Nathan finished at the mining office and rode on horseback up to the Carell homestead.

It was one of those perfect late spring afternoons and as they rose in elevation through Hunter Springs Canyon, the air began to clear and cool, making it a pleasant and relaxing ride. Leona's horse, Blaze, had to walk a bit faster than he liked to keep up with Boss, Nathan's horse. Still, he knew the way very well, and Leona was able to relax and enjoy the ride.

She noticed the wildflowers and the green grass that was growing in the shade. Her senses could pick up the scent of flowers here and there. She loved the higher elevations. Down below in town, there air was dryer, and the dust was pervasive. She had to clean their suite of rooms every other day or there would be a thick coating of it on everything.

Up at the homestead, the air was cooler, and she felt somehow cleaner. She reflected back on her time in Ohio, where the grit and

dirt of the city was the enemy to be fought with a mop and dust rag daily.

Nathan sat his horse with a natural grace that Leona admired. Growing up on the homestead, he had an easy way with all the animals, and they had discussed setting up a barn and getting a family cow once the house was completed. Leona thought she would enjoy having fresh milk and cream and the fertilizer for the garden would be an extra benefit. She got excited thinking about how their home and garden would look. She couldn't wait to sew curtains and pillowcases, to turn their house into a home. She daydreamed while she rode, about the colors she wanted in every room, and the way she would set up her kitchen. She'd been cooking in the Carells' cabin for long enough that she knew exactly what she liked and disliked about the way the small kitchen there was arranged. Since it was not her home, she had learned to adapt and work around in the cabin, and it was serviceable, if not ideal.

They talked little as they rode. Leona could see that there was something on her husband's mind. She figured he'd had a bad day at work, or something else had happened. She knew he'd tell her when

he was ready, and if her selective mutism had taught her anything it was that you couldn't force someone to speak if they were not ready to.

They put the horses away and took their bundles from the saddle packs into the house. Leona went about her usual routine, tidying the cabin and preparing dinner, laying out their clothes and hanging them up so they would be ready for Nathan to go to work the next day. Nathan stayed down in the barn tending the horses and making sure they were settled for the night. She heard him come up into the yard while she was carving up the fried chicken for their dinner. He stopped at the pump outside and washed up before coming into the cabin, going straight to their bedroom, and closing the door.

Leona thought it a bit odd, as he'd never closed a door against her before. Still, she trusted her husband, and knew that whatever was troubling him would soon see the light of day.

Soon she heard Nathan go back outside through the front door. She thought maybe he was going over to see Will across the road as he often did. They would discuss the progress on the building and

farming projects then come back in together for dinner. Will had not come back with them that afternoon; at least, Leona had not seen him. She wasn't even sure if he was planning to come to dinner that night.

She always made extra food just in case, and often sent food with her men to town so they could have a home-cooked meal for lunch. Tonight was Will's favorite fried chicken, so she hoped he'd be there. Either way, she thought it actually tasted better the next day.

She beat the eggs and soaked the chicken in buttermilk, then made up the flour dredge adding salt and pepper and a little cayenne, for spice. Her Arizona roots taught her that bland food was bad, and spice was good.

Just as she finished putting the chicken in the buttermilk, she heard Nathan calling from the front doorway, "Leona? Can you come out to the porch, please?" Nathan's voice sounded a little unusual. Leona's curiosity was piqued.

"I'll be there in a minute," she answered. She quickly rinsed the flour off her hands and dried them on her apron, then went out to

meet her husband on the porch.

Nathan was pacing, impatiently waiting for Leona to come, he kept feeling the weight in his pocket and turning the metal over and over with his hand.

Leona came out looking curious, wiping her hands on her apron. She stopped to wipe the door handle too, as she came by.

She looked at Nathan expectantly. “Yes? You wanted to see me about something?”

Nathan didn’t answer right away. “How was your day?” he finally asked her.

“Fine,” she answered, waiting for more. The seconds stretched into minutes and what seemed to be an eternity. Finally, she asked him, “How was your day?” Then a bit exasperated, thinking about her chicken waiting in the kitchen, she gave up. “All right, Nathan, what in the world is going on? You’ve been acting like a cat on a hot tin roof ever since we got here. Spill it.”

Nathan blushed and shuffled his feet. He reached into his pocket. “I’m sorry to be acting so strangely. I’m a little nervous. Actually, I wanted to give you something.”

Leona smiled at Nathan and there was another awkward pause while she waited for him to act. She looked at him with raised eyebrows. “Nathan?”

“Of course, I’m sorry Leona.”

He pulled the chain slowly out of his pocket. The silver chain caught her eye, and then the blue sapphires and diamonds lit up when touched by the afternoon sun, nearly blinding her. He watched his wife’s face for signs of recognition. It took a moment, but then the light came into Leona’s eyes, and she looked at the necklace, then back at Nathan with a question in her eyes. “Can it be?” She had a hard time believing her eyes.

When Leona realized that it was her mother’s necklace, the one they’d sold to go to Ohio, she went through the entire spectrum of

emotions all in the span of a few seconds. Nathan saw her register shock, sadness, joy, and then finally, love for the man who had recaptured this cherished possession and returned it to her. All in the same few moments she flashed back to the memory of opening the safety deposit box at the bank almost six years ago and the hastily made transaction that allowed her and Will to go to Ohio.

"Whatever are you sorry for Nathan?" Leona asked through her tears.

"I'm sorry it took me so long to track this down and get it back for you. I've been working on it since the day you told me you sold it. I could never figure out why Judy Dancher never told anyone that you and Will were still alive. I couldn't get that question out of my mind. I kept thinking that she should have told someone that you survived the fire and that she'd seen you at the bank that day.

"I tracked down Mrs. Dancher's daughter, who told me that her mother fell ill that very night she purchased the necklace from you and died shortly thereafter. I told her your story, but since she wasn't around when the purchase was made, I had to convince her that Mrs.

Grove truly did own the necklace and that it belonged to you, and she should sell it back to me."

Nathan stopped there to catch his breath. Leona's tears flowed freely as she embraced her husband.

"How did you convince her?" Leona still couldn't believe she was holding her mother's necklace in her hands.

"I went to the newspaper archives to see if there was a photograph of your mother wearing it. I seemed to recall there was an anniversary party that the newspaper covered. It was your parent's twenty-fifth, I remember they threw a big party." He smiled softly at the vague memory.

"Yes!" Leona remembered it too. "You and I snuck around the side porch to peek in the window at all the grown-ups dancing. I had to wear that yellow dress with the itchy collar." Leona smiled through her tears at the memory. "I can't believe this. You are so clever! I would never have thought of the newspaper office." Leona's eyes shone with admiration.

“As soon as I showed Miss Dancher the photograph, she readily agreed to sell the necklace back to me. She felt compassion for you and Will and agreed that you should have it back as a keepsake to hand down to your own daughter someday.”

Nathan beamed at his wife. He was so happy that all of his legwork had paid off. The Grove necklace was back in its rightful hands.

“Oh! Nathan. There’s no way I can express how much this means to me. That you did this for me.” Leona broke down in tears. Holding Nathan’s hands in hers, she looked into his eyes. “Thank you.”

She threw her arms around her husband’s neck, and they stood there for a long while embracing while Leona’s tears flowed. Nathan held her, stroking her back and absorbing her tears into his shirt.

He realized then that he had given his wife a great gift. She was healing through her joy and tears in that very moment. Nathan was carried away on the emotional wave himself, finding that for once, he

was the one at a loss for words.

Chapter 17

The next morning, Nathan found Leona in the kitchen preparing breakfast. She turned as he entered the kitchen and gifted him with a smile so bright, he almost had to step back from the brilliance of it.

"Good day, Leona. You look lovely this morning," he said, and he meant it. She was dressed in a soft yellow morning dress, her hair in a simple braid down her back and around her neck, she wore her mother's necklace. Happiness radiated out of every pore and her eyes sparkled as she greeted him.

"Good morning to you, too. I have the coffee on, and breakfast will be ready soon."

Nathan looked at her strangely, and Leona realized it was because she was wearing diamonds at breakfast. It surely must seem out of place, but Leona couldn't help herself. She simply wanted to have the necklace on.

"I know I probably shouldn't be wearing it, but…" Her words trailed off. "Oh! Nathan, it means the world that you got this back for

me.” Leona’s eyes welled with tears. “I still can’t believe it’s true.”

She turned back to the stovetop, stirring the porridge vigorously, to hide her emotions. She tucked the necklace underneath her apron, then picked up the coffee pot to pour out a cup for her husband.

“Of course you should wear it, but not all the time, maybe just for today,” Nathan agreed. “I know how happy you are to have it back.” Nathan sympathized with his wife’s desire to keep the necklace close to her, but he also knew how valuable that piece of jewelry was, having just had it appraised and paid for. He felt that they needed to safeguard it.

“Perhaps we should build a safe into our new house, or for now a safety deposit box at the bank isn’t such a bad idea, is it?”

He smiled as Leona’s face fell at the thought of letting the newly found trinket go back into a bank vault.

“It’s all right,” he relented, not being able to stand her sadness. “You can and should wear it for a while, but just here at home, not

out in the garden or on horseback. We surely don't want to lose it now that we've just recovered it," Nathan advised.

Leona reluctantly agreed. She knew Nathan was talking sense, and she should listen to her husband in this matter. However, she still could hardly believe she'd gotten the necklace back, and when she wore it, the connection to her mother felt so strong that she was loath to take it off and put it away in some stale vault.

"I cannot wait to tell Will about it! How wonderful you are to go to all the trouble of getting it back for me. It must have been awfully expensive."

Leona smiled again at her husband and agreed, "You're right, of course. It's a valuable piece and I shouldn't just wear it like everyday shoes. We should put it away safely and only bring it out on special occasions. Oh Nathan! I can hardly believe it's real. You actually did this thing for me." She was unable to contain her disbelief and joy.

"When we handed the necklace over to Mrs. Dancher that day at the bank, I honestly never thought I'd see it again. It didn't hold any

value to me then, it was just a means to an end, a way to get to Ohio. After we were there, I used to think about it, remembering the times I saw Mother wearing it. It made me sad to think I would never have it, and that I'd lost that connection to her. Now it's here, and I can touch it and wear it. I don't want to let it go just yet."

Nathan nodded and sat down at the table, smiling. Leona came and sat opposite him after placing his coffee on the table in front of him. He took her hand in his, looking into her eyes.

"Leona, you mean the world to me. If it were in my power to give you back all that you've lost, I would do it in a heartbeat. I hope you know that. This necklace is something I could get back for you; I was more than happy to do it."

The tone of his voice was so sincere, and he was so earnest that Leona's heart skipped a beat. She was filled with warm and loving feelings for Nathan and something else, almost a giddy feeling, like when they were teenagers. Her stomach fluttered a little, her hands got clammy, and she could feel her heart beating faster.

“Nathan, I’ve never been happier,” Leona said, in a breathless whisper. “Everything we’ve been through, all the lonely times so far away from each other, makes this time we have all that much sweeter. I think we were really meant to be together. My prayers have been answered in you.”

Her eyes showed him all that was in her heart. He understood because he felt the exact same way.

Nathan nodded. “I know what you mean. All that time we were apart, I never dreamed we’d have this. I thought about you all those years and wondered. I thought perhaps you’d married someone else, or… I don’t know...” He felt at a loss for words, but at the same time he knew that Leona understood. They were kindred spirits who, having lost and then found each other again, knew the value of it. They understood each other completely.

They sat there together for what seemed like an eternity, simply gazing into each other’s eyes, and holding hands. Nathan caressed Leona’s hands with his, wondering how she could possibly be so perfect, and thanking the Divine that she had come back into his life.

He studied the ring on her finger.

Remembering how he used to hold his mother's hand when he was a child, Nathan found himself twirling that gold band around and around. He thought his mother would have liked Leona and would be happy that they were together. There were characteristics they shared in common. Both women were strong, kind and loving. He thought his mother would most definitely approve of his choice of wife. He chuckled to himself. There had never been any other choice. It had always been Leona.

Eventually, they came around to discussing plans for the future, the house, furnishings, and how they wanted to set up the livestock area at the base of the hill. Nathan told Leona his plans for expanding the growing area of his father's fields and eventually, how he hoped the property would once again be made whole under the guidance of their combined family.

"I see it as a joint venture. Of course, that's after this place passes to me," he clarified. "With Will managing the orchards and me managing the livestock and cereal crops, I think we'll do all right. The

well is refreshed and operating at maximum capacity, which gives us an edge in farming over so many down below us who don't have that kind of water available. We'll be able to outgrow all the regional farmers as far as quantity and quality. I think we can make a real success of it. If we have a poor growing season, we can consider selling water too." Nathan saw a bright future for their ventures.

Leona talked animatedly about how she wanted to decorate and furnish their home.

"I can't wait to set up our house, Nathan," she said, practically jumping up and down in her chair. "I am already planning the colors and the curtains, and how I want the rugs to look. It's going to be beautiful, our home. I am so happy for all of our plans." She could scarcely contain herself.

"I'm happy for Will, too. He's going to have a wonderful home, and I hope he lets me furnish and decorate it too. I will do it with a masculine appeal, but I think it needs a woman's touch. I hope when he finally finds a bride, it will be someone that will like the way his house looks. I plan to send back East for fabric for cushions and

curtains and…”

Nathan laughed and she stopped her rant, puzzled. “Why in the world are you laughing at me? Have I gotten carried away? I guess I haven’t ever spoken this much since I’ve been back home.”

She finally stopped and looked at Nathan with wide eyes, realizing just how much she’d been prattling on. She gasped and put her hand to her mouth, surprised at her own verbosity. Then she laughed self-consciously and smiled at Nathan. She was simply happy, and it was obvious that she was energized and inspired by their plans for the future.

“What?” she asked again.

“Your smile could light a thousand candles, Leona,” Nathan beamed back at her. Leona blushed prettily, not sure how to take that kind of compliment. No one had ever talked to her that way before, and she wasn’t sure how to react. Her blush only deepened as Nathan let go of her hand to caress her cheek.

“Oh, Leona…” Nathan’s voice was husky with emotion. He stood and pulled her to her feet. There was so much he wanted to tell her, but words failed him. He could only convey those emotions through touch, and when they did touch, it was electric. The passion between them was rising, with emotion that threatened to take control of them both.

Nathan put his arms around Leona’s waist and drew her into his embrace. He looked so intensely into her eyes that she had no choice but to close hers and lean into him. Nathan was about to say what was in the fullness of his heart when he heard the front door open.

Leona was so enthralled with Nathan in that embrace that she hardly registered the opening of the door. She had a fleeting thought of, that’s probably Will, so she didn’t look up at first.

The sound of a voice shouting Nathan’s name jolted them both back into reality. Nathan knew who it was immediately. It wasn’t Leona’s brother that came roaring into the doorway shouting.

It was Milton Carell.

Chapter 18

In an instant, the tender moment between Leona and Nathan was shattered.

The “I love yous” between them remained unsaid as Nathan met his father’s angry face. Nathan felt at once reduced to the son at the mercy of his father’s rage. Milton’s face, mottled red with anger was the only thing he saw, and he was suddenly left feeling like a child who had done something naughty to be punished for.

Nathan had received no word from his father saying when he would return, so his arrival was a shock to them both.

“What is *she* doing in my home?” Milton hissed angrily, clearly recognizing Leona, even after all her time away.

Nathan took a deep breath and stood up tall. He shook that scared little boy feeling off and faced his father as a man.

“Welcome home, Papa. Leona is here due to a very strange and sad set of circumstances. It’s a long story. I wasn’t expecting you, why

didn't you cable that you were coming home?"

"She needs to leave my home immediately and go back to wherever she is staying," Milton barked adamantly. "Leave now," he directed at Leona, "and allow me to discuss my family matters in private with my son." His voice was cold, as was the look in his eyes as he looked at Leona with barely concealed hatred.

Leona, having little choice in the matter, excused herself. "I'll go across to the home place, Nathan." She spoke hardly above a whisper.

Milton Carell broke in. "What's the matter with her? Is she dumb or just rude?" he scoffed. "I knew there was always something funny about that girl." He spoke like she wasn't even in the room.

Nathan turned on his father, about to come unglued with anger when he felt Leona's hand on his arm. "Come find me. You know where I'll be." She squeezed Nathan's hand and, taking off her apron and hanging it on the hook, she paused. "Mr. Carell, the coffee is hot on the stove." She looked him in the eye, then gracefully exited the room. Picking up her bonnet and gloves, she made her way out the

front door. She got all the way down the steps into the yard before she broke down in tears.

"Leona's staying here with me now; she's my wife, Papa." Nathan said evenly. He spoke again quickly before his father could interject.

"You need to calm yourself. This is no kind of a homecoming, you barging in here yelling. We have a lot to talk about, but first you need to stop insulting Leona. We're married and she's part of our family now." Nathan took a deep breath and looked at his father, who was standing in front of him breathing heavily, a look of total confusion on his face.

"I wired to Cousin Agnes that we were married. Didn't you get my cable?" Milton Carell didn't answer, he just sat down heavily in the nearest chair and put his head in his hands.

Nathan continued, "I know there was bad blood in the past between our two families, but that has to stay in the past. With Leona and I married, everything has changed; and it's for the best, Papa, you'll see when I tell you the whole story."

Nathan poured his father a cup of coffee, and topped off his own, which had grown cold. He sat down opposite his father who seemed confused and was having trouble getting his bearings.

“The Groves are our enemies! They stole the land, the well! They are the reason your mother isn’t here today, don’t you understand that, son?” Milton was in anguish; he couldn’t believe his son would betray him in such a devious way.

“I know you won’t want to hear this Papa, but the Groves never tricked your father. They didn’t steal anything. I did some research with Will Grove into the land transactions. The Groves bought the land and the rights to the well legally and fairly, no matter what you’ve been told.

“During that time, there was no one else around who had that kind of money, there was so much poverty and lack here. They may have bought it for less than market value, but not by much by the standards of the day, of that I can assure you.”

Milton scoffed at Nathan's speech, clearly not believing him.

"That woman you married," he sneered, "her grandfather was a thief. They undercut my father so deeply on the price, knowing we had no choice but to accept their offer, we were in such a dire financial situation. After that land grab, our whole family fell to ruin, it was like it just decayed from the inside out." Milton spat the words as if they were poisonous.

"Were the years you were with Mother before she got sick, bad years? Was our family decaying? I thought we were happy then," Nathan answered him. He remembered his parents being happy together before his mother became ill. Of course his father could not see it, he was so convinced of being wronged, that he may never understand.

"If we'd still had the land when your mother got sick, we could have sold it then, or sold the water; she might still be here," Milton replied, sticking to his theory.

"Don't you understand, Papa? You are saying you would have

done exactly as your father did a generation before. Sell the land, sell the water rights. It's really no different." Nathan shook his head, realizing he may never be able to convince his father to change his beliefs about the land transaction, so he took another approach.

"What you don't seem to grasp is that we–Leona and I, in a joint partnership with her brother–we own the well now. It's back in the family, Papa. You don't need to hold onto that grudge any longer."

"So you're saying I should just let it die, like the Groves let your mother die," Milton stated bitterly. It cut Nathan to the heart. He had no reply.

Milton went on, "If the Groves had not tricked my father out of the land, our lives would be very different now, and your mother might still be alive. That's all I'll say on the subject."

Milton pushed himself away from the table, his coffee sitting untouched, and stood up. He looked around his cabin, taking in all the changes that had been wrought on his home since he was away, snorted in derision, and stomped away to collect his baggage.

Chapter 19

Nathan found Leona exactly where he expected: her “thinking place.”

She was sitting in the grass a few feet away from the house, knees drawn up to her chin. He could see she was tense, and as he approached, he noticed she’d been weeping.

“Hey,” he said quietly, not wanting to startle her. She looked up at his approach with such sadness in her eyes that he felt his anger towards his father rise again. Ever the peacemaker, he knelt down beside his bride and took her in his arms. “I’m so sorry Papa was rude to you.” Nathan stroked her hair and planted a kiss on top of her head. Leona nodded and held him tightly, saying nothing.

“I will talk to Papa, try to explain everything, he’s just not ready to listen yet. He’s been keeping this old grudge for so long, it’s like a comfort to him. I hope we can change his mind. I’d like to try. Let’s have dinner and stay tonight, and we can go to the house in town in the morning. I won’t allow you to be insulted, Leona. You’re my wife, and we’ll stand together, even if it means standing against my father.”

She smiled at him, sadly. “I don’t want to be the one to come between you and your father. He’ll hate me even more,” she muttered, voice cracking as she spoke.

“Don’t you worry about anything, sweetheart. I’ll take care of Papa,” Nathan reassured her. Together they walked back to the cabin hand in hand, each lost in their own thoughts. They went straight into the bedroom, where Nathan suggested Leona rest before preparing the evening meal.

Leona took off her bonnet and gloves, removed her shoes, and loosened her corset. She opened the bedroom window to let in the afternoon breeze along with the birdsong and lay down.

Her mind was racing with words she wished she’d said to Milton Carell, but as she played the conversation over in her head, she realized that Nathan was right. His father was still holding tight to old grudges. Changing his mind would take some effort. She prayed that Nathan could show how well everything was working out in their combined partnership, and that Milton would soon accept her into the

family.

She woke with a start. *I must have fallen asleep!* Leona had a moment of panic, then took a deep breath and sighed.

The clock on the wall showed that only an hour had passed, so she still had plenty of time to prepare dinner. She splashed some water on her face, arranged her clothes, smoothed her hair and steeled herself for the next encounter with her father-in-law.

Leona made her way into the kitchen and donned her apron. She lit the stove and drew the water from the pump, putting it on to boil. She had a leg of lamb in the ice box and planned to make a stew with the meat and some garden vegetables. She was mixing up biscuit dough when Nathan came in. He looked calm, smiling at her as she looked up from her mixing bowl.

“Whatever is in that pot smells good!” He kissed her on the cheek and gave her a squeeze.

“Lamb stew,” she smiled back at him. “I’ll have the biscuits in

the oven in a few minutes."

"How are you feeling?" he asked with concern. "Don't let my father get under your skin. He's going to love you once he gets to know you, and Lord knows he'll have plenty of time, with us living across the road," he reasoned.

Leona nodded and continued with her stirring. "I'll be all right, I'm not as frightened of him as I was when I was a girl. I think I understand him now."

Their conversation was interrupted when the back door flew open and Will breezed in, full of news about his work at the office of the sheriff, and the court cases he was working on. Leona cringed, knowing what was coming. She didn't have a chance to warn him before Milton came bustling into the room to see who was there.

"So! What is this now? Are you turning my home into a boarding house as well as conducting secret weddings?" he sneered at Nathan, shooting daggers at Will Grove.

Will was caught off-guard by Milton's presence, and was immediately contrite and gracious. "Hello Mr. Carell. I didn't know you were home. I sincerely apologize. I won't stay where I'm not wanted. I'll take my things into town and stay there tonight." Milton huffed, but said nothing.

Nathan, wanting to keep the peace, interjected, "Will, you've only just got here. At least stay for dinner, that's all right, isn't it Papa?"

Milton remained silent, but didn't protest, leaving Nathan to assume tacit agreement from his father.

"It's settled then, come and help me in the barn, Will. I also have some things to discuss with you about the orchard irrigation."

Will nodded. "Thank you, I'm mighty hungry. That food smells good." He winked at his sister, and then, seriously, to Milton, "Mr. Carell, I have no desire to impose on your hospitality, but I would welcome the chance to tell you about our plans for the property and our shared ventures."

Milton grudgingly agreed, “Why not? This day has been full of surprises, I’m ready for some explanations.”

Milton left the kitchen and the three breathed a collective sigh. Nathan was relieved that his father’s introduction to Will didn’t escalate the way the encounter with Leona had.

Maybe his father was going to come around to seeing things their way after all. All he could do was hope.

“We’ll be back in about half an hour, will dinner be ready?” he asked Leona.

“I’ll ring the bell. Go on now and let me finish cooking,” she gave her brother a playful shove towards the door, then resumed setting the table and getting the meal ready.

Forty minutes later she rang the bell, signaling the men to come back in. Milton was in his room with the door closed, so Leona waited until her men had washed up and were ready to sit down before she

quietly knocked on Milton's door.

"Come in," came the gruff reply. Leona's heart was pounding, but strangely, she was less afraid of her father-in-law than she had been earlier that day. She realized that he was a complex man with a lot of bitter grief inside of him, and she actually felt compassion for him, much to her surprise.

She opened the door just wide enough to poke her head in, "Dinner is ready," she said evenly.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," he said brusquely.

Leona didn't wait for further reply, she closed the door quickly. Nathan and Will were in the common room having a drink. Nathan looked up at his wife expectantly, "Is he coming?" Leona nodded as she made her way into the kitchen to serve the meal.

Dinner was a tense affair. Will and Nathan kept up a steady stream of conversation, doing their best to include facts that would inform Milton of what had transpired when the Groves returned. They

told the story of the sheriff's murder, and how Leona and Nathan got together. The newlyweds held hands as Nathan told Milton about the wedding, and the fact that they'd been pining for each other all the years since the fire at the Groves'. Milton listened to it all, eating his dinner in silence. Silence that he shared with Leona, who added little commentary to the conversation. She was still a bit intimidated by Milton, who spent most of the meal glaring at all of them in turn. Finally, he spoke, directing his questions and comments to his son.

"What does this partnership mean to our family, Nathan? Are you still planning to work your own land, my land, Carell land?" he inquired, raising an eyebrow, emphasizing the family name. "Or, are you making yourself over as a Grove now? Have you forgotten how your grandfather built this farm out of the wilderness, only to have it stolen away? Where is your family pride?" Milton's voice was on edge.

Nathan sighed. "Papa, I did the research into the land purchase. It was legitimate, legal, and fair. I am a Carell for now and always, and now, so is Leona. We've married our two families, and there's no room in our marriage for hatred." He made every attempt possible to be polite as he spoke.

“Uniting our families, and uniting our interests benefits us all. I’ve been working our land, with Will’s help, too. We’re going to have a fruitful harvest, and with all the water we have irrigating the fields, we are going to out-produce every other farmer down below us, barring any natural disasters, of course.”

He hastily added, “You’re going to benefit, too, Papa. Working together is good for all of us, don’t you see?” Milton didn’t answer right away, but Nathan was glad that he at least was able to speak his mind, uninterrupted.

Will was nodding his agreement as Nathan was speaking, and now it was his turn. “Mr. Carell, I have been out in Ohio, as you know, taking care of my sister. We certainly didn’t plan to have things happen this way, and certainly no one is sadder than Nathan at the loss of his good friend John, but the happy outcome cannot be denied. I have wanted to come back home for a long time. I want to rebuild the house, make sure my sister is secure, and work in Hunter Springs. Maybe I’ll find a wife for myself. I have no desire for enmity between our families, especially now that my sister is part of yours.”

He inhaled, his mind momentarily drawn back to the time before the fire, when Nathan's mother was still alive.

"I hope you can see we are all sincere and working very hard to build something that will be a legacy for future generations," he paused, with a pointed glance at his sister. "Please consider putting an end to your grudge against my family," he pleaded. "My sister deserves to live a happy life with your son."

Having said his piece, Will turned back to his lamb stew, leaving Milton to ponder his words. Yet, nothing more was said that night.

Chapter 20

The following Monday found Nathan and Leona in Hunter Springs. They'd been staying at their rooms in town since the day after Milton's return, only going up the canyon to take care of business at the Grove place, and for Leona to do some housekeeping for Milton at the cabin.

Milton's treatment of Leona had improved only slightly in the days since his return. He'd been treating her with strained politeness, but she believed he secretly looked forward to her visits because that meant that he would be the recipient of her stellar cooking. To date, he'd not yet invited them to share in any of the meals she'd prepared, so Leona took it upon herself to make extra for Will, and deliver food to his cabin across the road, if he happened to be in residence there, or to take meals back to the boarding house rooms where Will often joined them for dinner and business discussions with Nathan over drinks. These conversations often lasted well into the night and Leona would often excuse herself and retire, leaving the men to discuss farming and issues regarding building materials until the lamps burned low.

Leona was cooking and cleaning at the cabin with regularity, and Nathan continued to work in the gardens and fields on his father's land. He was also spending alternate weekends and evenings working across the street at the Grove property, getting the first pieces of the new house framed and the plumbing and infrastructure completed. Nathan was satisfied with how his vision for improving the land and orchards was coming to fruition. The trees had recovered beautifully from the aggressive pruning the crew had done, the new irrigation lines were bringing lots of water to the orchard, and the apple blossoms were setting well, portending a rich harvest later in the year. The smell of new apple blossoms gave him a warm and happy feeling.

Nathan felt a great deal of satisfaction at the implementation of his ideas for improving production on the farm. He also enjoyed consulting with Will regarding the building of both the Grove house at the scene of the devastating fire, and what he'd come to think of as "Leona's Place" on the mesa below the original homestead.

Work at the mining office was lucrative, as the mine was prosperous, and Nathan's position as a partner in the venture allowed him financial independence as well as affording him additional leisure

time. He felt, for the first time in his life, that he was finally achieving something important and had a sense of purpose and a vision for the future.

He couldn't wait to present Leona with her very own home. The way he saw things, to share that with the woman he loved was the ultimate success.

Will and Nathan had engaged a crew of ten men, at no small sum, to work on the Grove land. Some were assigned to the orchards, others to Leona's place, and the rest worked on the rebuild of the Grove house. Everything was moving ahead at an acceptable pace, with few interruptions.

Nathan and Will were both pleased to go up the canyon at the end of their workday to see that notable progress was being made. Will had his shack on the property, where he spent some nights and weekends now that the weather was warmer. He was the person that the building crew reported to.

The building foreman, a construction expert from Texas named

Hank, had built several homes and storefronts in Hunter Springs in the past decade, and came highly recommended. He and Will had come to a comfortable understanding. Hank had been living in town when the fire took Will's childhood home and had always dreamed of rebuilding the stately residence. He jumped at the chance to run the crew under Will's supervision.

That particular Monday, a warm and dry day in late spring, found Leona window shopping at a dress shop in Hunter Springs, while Nathan perused a list of materials he needed for the new house. There was a limit to what he could purchase in town, so he made mental notes of what he would have to order in Tombstone to have brought in by freight train.

He was just turning to go into the hardware store when a dark-haired woman caught his eye. Her walk was somehow familiar as she approached. She was dressed in black with a dark bonnet on her raven hair. In a moment, Susan Murray was by his side. She took his arm and turned him to face her.

Nathan was happy to see her, and still felt a great deal of guilt

for not being the person to break the news to her when her brother was killed. He had not brought Leona over to call upon Susan, because he knew she was in mourning for her brother, and it was too soon for social calls.

"Susan. I'm surprised to meet you out here, it's always good to see you," he greeted her politely with a handshake and a kiss on her cheek. "I've been wanting to introduce you to Leona, but I thought it was still too soon."

He had plans to call upon her with Leona after a respectable amount of time had passed. He wanted to tell her everything, to explain why he married Leona and to share with her how much he missed her brother, his dear friend.

"Nathan, I know John would be happy that you and Leona are reunited and helping each other through your grief, and I would love to meet her another time. Right now, I have something important I need to discuss with you. Can you spare a moment to speak with me?" Her countenance and tone of voice were deadly serious, and her words had a gravity in them that made Nathan stop and take notice.

“Of course, Susan, anything you need.” Nathan offered her his arm gallantly, steering her into the shade of a store awning, giving her his full attention.

“I understand that Will Grove, your wife’s brother, is doing a lot of work in the sheriff’s office.”

Nathan registered a look of surprise and nodded. “Yes. He’s an attorney and has been working on some of the pending legal cases that involved John. What has that to do with you?”

Susan took a deep breath, and Nathan could see she was grappling with something important.

“I’ve got no problem with that, I know he’s a lawyer, but…” She trailed off.

Nathan’s curiosity was aroused by her opening statement. “Yes, we’ve agreed that Will is working in the Sheriff’s Department now, what is on your mind, Susan?” Nathan was getting a bit impatient

with all of this beating around the bush. He bit his tongue and waited for Susan to come out with it. He was shocked to hear what she said next.

"Nathan, I've been hearing rumors that Will Grove is some kind of confidence man, a criminal and a scoundrel." Susan spoke quietly, not wanting passersby to hear her.

"I can't imagine where you heard something like that. Will, a con man? I grew up with Will right here in Hunter Springs! He's a good guy, I'm in business with him myself. I think people here know and like him," Nathan said, wanting to defend his brother-in-law's good name.

Susan stood up straight and looked Nathan directly in the eye. "Whether people like him or not, I will not see all the hard work my brother went through and died for laid waste by some upstart scoundrel of a con man. If he endangers my brother's work in the Sheriff's Department, I will take legal action." She was adamant.

Nathan was perplexed. He couldn't imagine where this was

coming from. Everything he knew about Will Grove told him that it could not possibly be true.

"I am sure I don't know what you mean, Susan. I have known Will nearly all my life. He has never done anything to warrant this kind of concern. He is a man who loves and reveres the law. Where are you getting your information? I doubt it's a reliable source."

Nathan couldn't believe what he had just heard, and knew there must be some mistake.

"Yes, well, it was…" Susan stopped short. Nathan felt a hand take his, it was Leona. Nathan was sure that was why Susan didn't finish telling him who the source of the rumor was.

"Leona, this is Susan Murray," he introduced them. Leona surprised Nathan by embracing Susan in a long and tearful hug. He then realized that the two women had already been corresponding back when Leona was planning to come back to marry John. They began to talk together in low tones, and he felt at once that he was intruding on their private grief. He cleared his throat to get their

attention.

“Susan, Leona, I’ll go ahead in and place my order. Leona and I were going to have supper at the hotel with Will this evening. Would you care to join us?”

“Please come, Susan. I’d like to talk with you some more,” Leona urged her.

“Let’s go sit for a while and visit now, instead? I’m overly warm out here, and a cold glass of tea or a soda sounds good,” Susan replied. “Will you come and collect us at the drugstore when you’re finished, Nathan?”

Nathan agreed. He’d rather have them speak in private than out on the street, it just wasn’t seemly.

“I won’t be more than thirty minutes, ladies. You go ahead and go inside to cool off.”

The two young women crossed the street arm in arm, heads

together, talking animatedly. Nathan was sure they had a lot to talk about. He thought again about Susan's concerns about Will Grove.

A confidence man? Nathan couldn't imagine where that rumor had originated, nor what it could be about. He resolved to do some checking around and to speak to Will as soon as possible. He didn't want any kind of problems or scandal to touch his wife or her brother.

Chapter 21

Leona was at the Carell cabin about a week later, washing dishes in the tidy kitchen. Will and Nathan were down at the barn where Nathan's mare, Boots, was in labor. He had bought the mare already bred to a fine stallion and had plans to raise the foal as a present for Leona. Boots was a quiet mare, easy to handle, and Nathan hoped that she would pass that quiet temperament on to her offspring.

Leona had never had a horse of her own but riding the leased horse from the livery for so long had given her the desire to have one. It was practical, given their frequent trips from Hunter Springs to the cabin. Nathan had already drawn up plans to erect a small barn at the west end of the mesa where their house was being built to house their horses and a family cow.

The crews were already driving the posts to fence the corrals and the garden. Leona was excited about the progress and went to check on it every few days. The crew had gotten used to her being around and looked forward to her arrival as she always brought with her some homemade food and cold drinks for the workmen.

Everything was coming together beautifully for them. Leona could never remember being so happy. She loved Nathan and loved their life together. She could not wait until they could move into their own home and quit this nomadic back and forth existence. She was tired of taking so many trips from town to their home and splitting her time between places. She didn't mind cooking and keeping house for Nathan's father, but she didn't want to do it indefinitely. Milton always acted like he was doing her the favor, instead.

She was looking forward to keeping her own house and not having to spend as much time with her father-in-law in close proximity. She never knew when she would be the recipient of a rude comment, a slight, or the disgusted looks of Milton Carell. She tried to stay positive, reminding herself that she was doing this for her husband. She was trying to hold onto the hope that Milton might come around to their way of thinking, but after weeks of dealing with his negativity and rudeness, she came to the conclusion that it would most likely never happen.

Leona was convinced that Milton Carell would always blame her and Will for the loss of his family's land, and even two generations

later, would never be able to allow himself to let go of that old grudge. He genuinely believed in his hateful fantasy and was clearly never going to be swayed from his belief that he'd been robbed of his land and his wife due to the machinations of the Grove family. Now that his son had married into the enemy camp, as it were, he was even more determined to perpetuate the story of his victimization at the hands of his neighbors.

Oh! Why can't he see that we are one family now, and he has no reason to hold onto that grudge? Leona thought. *Ah, well, we all have our crosses to bear, I suppose Milton Carell is mine*.

She turned her attention to the glasses in the dishpan, rinsing and drying them on the sideboard; she picked up a pot from the dishwater. She would soon be finished and go down to the barn to check on the arrival of the new foal, which Nathan had said was imminent when he and Will had left her about an hour before.

Leona was startled out of her reverie by the reflection in the window from movement behind her. Milton had come in while she was lost in thought and was standing behind her.

“Are you proud of yourself?” he asked her.

Leona turned to face him, confused. “What do you mean?” she replied, her stomach twisting in discomfort. Clearly Milton had an axe to grind, and she dreaded the confrontation. She was alone in the house, and Milton knew it. Leona put down the pot she had been scrubbing and dried her hands on her apron, not knowing how to respond.

“Don’t play dumb, you do that so well,” Milton sneered at her. The amount of vitriol and hatred dripping from his words frightened her. Leona gasped but had no reply. She felt she was losing her voice all over again. She couldn’t answer, only stare wide-eyed at Milton Carell, waiting to hear what he would say to her next.

“Taking our land and stealing the well wasn’t enough for you? You–your family–took my dear wife from me, and now you’ve taken my son from me, too. Nathan lost his mother because of you. Will you Groves never stop taking from me?” There was anguish in Milton’s voice, but also something much more sinister that made Leona’s blood

run cold. He still had more to say, and she was dreading it.

"Your father could have deeded the well back to us, that would have saved her life, you know. We had no money to pay for the doctor, the medicine, nothing! She might have *lived*." Milton was on the verge of hysteria; Leona could hear the edge in his voice.

She didn't know what to say, but attempted to appease him.

"Mr. Carell, I was just a child, and I only remember a little bit about it. Bits and pieces of conversations between my parents, mostly. Something about them needing to keep the well, not being able to afford to let the whole place go. My parents didn't want to harm you or Mrs. Carell. They needed to keep the land for their own reasons."

Milton interrupted her. "Your father kept it out of spite!" he practically shouted at her; she was trapped and had no avenue to get away. Milton Carell's face was red, and his fists were clenched with the passion and rage he was feeling. Leona feared he might become violent. She looked around frantically for a way out, her eyes darting from the kitchen door to the hallway and back to Milton's angry face.

Before the situation could escalate further, there was a light knock on the door. The dog started barking loudly, which broke the spell and stopped Milton in his rant. Leona sidled past her father-in-law, who took a step backwards as she passed. She breathed a deep sigh of relief as she reached the door.

Susan Murray was the fortuitous visitor who had unknowingly intervened at the most opportune moment. Leona greeted her, then Milton brushed her to the side and pushed past the two women, muttering to himself as he rushed out the door. Susan looked at Leona's pale face and shaking hands, quickly embracing her.

"What has happened Leona, are you all right?"

Leona returned her embrace gratefully and gave a brief recounting of what had transpired in the kitchen. Susan was sympathetic and seemed also to be rather shocked.

"I had no idea that Mr. Carell held such views. Nathan and John never discussed it in front of me, nor confided anything of the sort.

You poor child! I'm so sorry you have to live this way."

"Thank you, it's not going to be for very long now," Leona replied. "I'd like to take you over and show you the progress on the new houses if you have time today?" Leona's voice was more a plea than anything else.

"I'd like that. It seems that aside from what you have to endure from Nathan's father, everything else is going very well for the two of you. I'm happy for you, truly," Susan said sincerely. The two women went into the kitchen to sit down, Leona serving tea and cookies to her visitor.

"Don't worry about Mr. Carell," Susan assured Leona. "I am sure that Nathan will step in and take care of this issue with his father. I know him, he's not going to let you be abused.

"It's funny, these types of land and water issues tend to come up from time to time. I think it's just that we're in such a needy place for water and people's fortunes rise and fall so quickly. There is always someone willing to buy you out when you're in trouble, but the loser

can become embittered when they realize what they have truly lost."

"Fortunes can be won and lost in a day here, to be sure," Leona agreed. "We sure lost everything in a matter of minutes when our parents were killed." Leona looked up as the door opened and Will entered with a light knock.

"Hey, sister. How are you today?"

Leona smiled and greeted her brother, not noticing that Susan Murray had gone quiet and tense at his arrival.

Will was oblivious to Susan's change of demeanor, recognizing her when Leona introduced them as the woman he'd met several times at the sheriff's office.

"Hello again, Miss Murray. We meet once more. Are you following me home now?" he teased.

Susan Murray blushed prettily, stood up quickly and flounced out of the kitchen in a huff, leaving Will and Leona looking surprised.

“Will! You need to be more polite,” Leona admonished her brother.

“Huh,” was Will’s reply as he too darted out of the room.

Leona was quite puzzled by her brother’s behavior. Will was not one to ever falter in a social situation. He was never rude, especially to a lady. What on earth had he done to cause Susan to mistrust him so much? How very odd.

What a strange turn of events! she thought. *Then again, he has been working tremendous hours. Perhaps he is on edge from work.* Just then, mid-thought, she realized that she’d forgotten to ask her brother about the birth of the new foal.

She looked around for Susan and saw her out on the front porch. She went out to her, apologizing for her brother’s rudeness. Susan was gracious, but her demeanor had changed. To Leona she seemed guarded. Not exactly angry or disappointed, but it was clear that there was something going on. Leona hoped her new friend would confide

in her.

“Would you like to see the new foal?” she asked. Susan agreed, and the two women walked down to the barn together to check on the new arrival.

Chapter 22

Nathan felt it coming, the same as every year around this time. The years mattered not; the loss was still sharply painful. Perhaps it was because of the age he was, still in his teens, when his mother passed away. Time had not erased, reduced or softened, but had sealed the grief indelibly upon his heart. He never had to consult a calendar; the late spring weather and the cycles of the land reminded him each year that the anniversary of her passing was nearly upon them.

This year, however, there was some difference. This year he had Leona back in his life, his love, his wife. That somehow made it easier to bear, knowing she stood with him.

The relationship between Nathan and his father, still strained, was bearable–but just. Milton still maintained his stance about being the victim of the Grove family and refused to soften his heart towards Nathan's marriage or his wife. He frequently made comments that implied that Nathan had betrayed his family, refusing to recognize that as time passed, the Carell fortunes were actually improving in spite of his beliefs.

As the anniversary of his wife's death approached, he took to imbibing considerable amounts of alcohol in the evenings, sometimes beginning earlier in the day. The effect on his temper was significant, releasing his inhibitions and his tongue. Many comments he might have stifled were unleashed when he was in his cups.

Nathan did his best to soothe his father, to give him time alone, but his concern rose within him as he saw his father's grief rise, along with his own, and with it, something else, a sort of sinister shadow that Milton Carell would bring with him into all of the encounters and squabbles that inevitably occurred between father and son. When these clashes did happen, Milton was the aggressor and the instigator.

Nathan did his level best to keep a steady and even temper when dealing with his father. He had compassion for Milton, who had suffered a great deal of hurt and loss in his life. Nathan didn't wish to add to it, but it seemed that, in marrying Leona and joining the Grove family with theirs, that he had unwittingly done just that. He wouldn't apologize. He believed that marrying Leona was the best thing that had ever happened to him, and he simply wished that his father could

recognize the benefits of being a part of a combined venture between the two families.

The spring rains had been lacking, and the town of Hunter Springs was abuzz with talk of drought. Worry, concern, and a fatalistic attitude were distributed amongst the farmers and residents. Some predicted failure of crops and others held out hope for rain. It was still late spring, so more rain was certainly possible. Then, there were the monsoons in mid-summer that often provided a great deal of rain in a short period of time.

For Will Grove, the drought conditions hadn't seemed to affect his ability to grow crops. Nathan's brilliant irrigation design allowed his orchards and fields to thrive, in huge contrast to the farms in the valley below. The Carells, however, were not as fortunate, due to the fact that Nathan had worked more on the Grove property at first than he did on his father's. The unirrigated fields were looking poor, and the outcome for the crops they'd planted was in question. They were in danger of falling victim to the drought. This gave Milton Carell no end of ammunition with which to fire at his son and daughter-in-law.

“Well, son, it appears that you and your wife have succeeded in ruining us further,” Milton commented one Saturday as Leona worked cleaning his cabin, and Nathan prepared to work in the field.

He was concerned about the drought as well, but had some ideas about piping some water from the Grove land to save the crops. He knew he didn’t have much time to accomplish this task, and his father’s negative comments weren’t persuading him that he should even help save them.

“Papa, what are you talking about?” Nathan was exasperated, nearly out of patience. “It’s been nearly a month since you’ve come back, don’t you think it’s time you just accepted the fact that our families are joined?”

“Never!” growled Milton. “The Groves have been at the heart of every disaster. Your mother would still be with us if it weren’t for them!” He sounded desperate, wallowing in a twisted kind of love which by now, had nowhere to go.

“Then, you had to go and marry one! I don’t think I’ll ever

forgive you for that." Milton stomped over to the sideboard and poured himself a drink.

Nathan's heart sank; he knew that the rest of the day was going to be even more difficult if his father was drinking.

He sighed. "Papa, I'm going down to check the eastern end of the property. Then I'm going over to discuss some plans with Will. Please be nice to Leona while I'm gone. She's here to help you."

Nathan didn't wait for a response but walked out to the back porch where his wife was getting clothes ready to hang out on the line. She worked diligently getting each garment through the wringer and into the basket.

"Here, let me carry that." He stepped up and took the basket. Together they walked down to the clothesline.

"I'm going to ride down and look at those lower fields, then go talk to Will. I shan't be more than an hour. If Papa gives you any trouble, go over to your brother's and I'll meet you there, all right?"

Leona nodded.

"I'm a little afraid of him these days, especially when he's, well, you know…" Leona didn't want to say it out loud for fear of offending her husband. Nathan nodded and leaned over to kiss Leona on the cheek.

She smiled sadly as he made his way to the barn. Her last encounter with Milton had been so unpleasant that she vowed to avoid being alone with him ever again if she could help it.

Milton was only slightly more well-behaved when his son was around. He tended to be more verbally abrasive, but Leona knew he would not be violent towards her. Nathan frequently found reasons to stay nearby when she was cleaning or cooking. He would also find tasks to involve his father in to avoid leaving them alone together.

That evening found them having dinner in their suite of rooms at the boarding house. They didn't have a lot to say to one another, feeling a comfort in silence between them. They retired early and fell asleep immediately, both weary from their exertions and the trip back

to town.

Nathan tossed and turned, restless. Images, disjointed and fragmented, taunted his sleep. His mother came to him, reading as she did when he was a child, then morphing in his vision to the image of her on her deathbed, causing him to cry out. He awoke with a start, cold sweat running down his brow and soaking his night clothes through.

He lay there, in the dark, for a few minutes, trying for yet another time to recall his mother's face from his boyhood. He tried in vain to remember the sound of her voice, but the memory eluded him. When his breathing had returned to normal and his heart rate slowed, he made his way out of bed.

He removed his shirt and splashed water on his face, toweling his body and face dry. Still shirtless, he made his way into the kitchen in the dark, lost in the emotions of his dreams. He startled with a cry when he felt a hand on his arm. He recoiled from the touch.

It was Leona.

“I heard you cry out. Are you all right?” She stepped back from him, her brow furrowed. She didn’t understand why he recoiled from her touch.

“It was a bad dream, that is all,” he replied gruffly, not wanting to lose the images the dream had brought him. Her presence seemed an imposition. Then, he was immediately contrite. “I’m sorry, yes, I’m all right. It’s just this time of year gets to me. It’s worse this year with my father and me at odds.”

Leona nodded, already heating water on the stove. “Sit here, I’ll make some tea.”

Nathan did as she bade him, watching with wonder how his beautiful wife kept her composure, always taking everything in stride. He admired her ability to flow with the changes. He imagined her family tragedy had set her up with this ability against her will. He thought that she, too, must have a time of year that would be difficult for her to contend with and noted that he would be supportive and helpful to her, as she was to him.

They drank their tea in silence, then Leona asked Nathan to read to her from his mother's book. He hesitated, then agreed.

They settled themselves in the parlor and Nathan read until he couldn't keep his eyes open. Sleep beckoned. He realized that Leona had already fallen asleep on his chest. Her even breathing and slight blush of her cheek made her look like a child. His heart squeezed. If he had one regret, it was that he had not fought harder to help her parents the day of the fire. If he'd gotten to them sooner, they may have survived. *Ancient history, now*, he told himself.

He closed the book, marking the page for next time and squirmed out from under Leona. He picked her up gently and carried her to bed.

Tucking her into the blankets, he noticed again how angelic she looked when asleep. His regret came back to haunt him. "I really did make a mistake," he said aloud, wishing he could change his choices in the past. Shaking his head, he walked back into the sitting room to extinguish the lamp, not realizing that Leona had heard his comment. As he crawled into bed, Leona turned away from him. He didn't see

the hurt in her eyes.

Chapter 23

Leona heard Nathan say he'd made a mistake and her mind raced. She nearly burst into tears thinking he meant he'd made a mistake in marrying her and trying to bring her into his family. She was devastated to think that he was already regretting their marriage. She knew that rushed marriages didn't always work out, but she felt–and she had thought Nathan did, too–that their hurried union was just a starting point for them to rekindle their past love and to build a life together from there.

The thoughts whirled in her head until long after she heard the faint snoring that signaled that Nathan had fallen asleep. She finally succumbed to sleep herself in the early hours of the morning while the moon was still high. She dreamed fitfully, images of her wedding came to her, bringing joy and a sharp pain. In her dream she said her vows, and Nathan was not there to answer them. She looked around in vain for her bridegroom, but he was nowhere to be found. She found herself running to catch a man up ahead on the street, she reached out to him, placing her hand on his arm to stop him. He turned to face her, but it wasn't Nathan. The man she was chasing down was John Murray.

The next morning dawned dry and warm. Leona rose early, having a cup of tea alone before Nathan got up. She thought through her feelings and decided that since this time of year was difficult for both Nathan and his father, that it was ill-advised for her to force herself upon them. She was determined to keep out of Milton's way completely and to give Nathan as much leeway as he needed to work out his emotional issues and decide how he was going to handle the "mistake" he'd made.

The insults and innuendo from Milton Carell replayed in her head. It was distressing that he believed his son had betrayed him, but now it seemed he had Nathan reconsidering all of his plans and decisions as well. Leona was heartbroken at the thought, but at least she had her brother nearby, should everything they'd been building fall apart.

Nathan got up and ate breakfast. He was in a hurry to get to his office for an early meeting.

"I'll come get you after I've finished my meeting and we can go

up to the cabin. The men are bringing up the pipes to lay in the ditches today. It's not going to be long before we have water on those lower fields." He was excited by the prospect of getting the water on the crops.

Leona nodded and said nothing. Nathan kissed her on the cheek, not really noticing her turn away from him, as he bustled out the door.

Leona decided that she couldn't bear to sit around the house all day waiting for him to return. Usually, she looked forward to seeing him at the end of the day, but with everything that had transpired, and what she'd overheard him say, that had changed. She tidied up and swept the floors, thinking long and hard about what might happen next. She thought some advice might help to clarify her confusion.

She thought it best to go see Susan Murray. It had been a while since her visit during that altercation she'd had with Milton. Leona had a sudden desire to consult with her friend. She wasn't used to having another woman to confide in. She was sure Susan would have

a unique perspective on the situation, being older, more mature and having observed, if not lived out, more of life's experiences. Leona left word with the landlady that she was going to call on her friend, and to let her husband know that she wouldn't be accompanying him to the cabin that evening.

Leona found Susan at home and the two women soon settled into comfortable rocking chairs on the front porch of Susan's home. Leona couldn't help looking around and thinking that if life had dealt her a different hand, she might be mistress of this very house. She felt a twinge of sadness, and compassion for Susan, who had lost her brother so tragically. She didn't think Susan had any other family and was quite alone in the world now that her brother was gone.

Leona was glad the two of them were friends and confidantes. It meant the world to Leona that she wasn't bereft of female friends. She'd had school friends in Hunter Springs when she was a girl but had lost touch with them after fleeing to Ohio with Will. The correspondence she'd set up with Susan had been a fresh and new relationship that she cherished. She felt they needed each other and hoped that Susan felt the same.

“I think what you need to do is ask Nathan directly about what he said and ask him to explain himself. I think you might have taken the meaning wrong. The way I see it, Nathan is head over heels in love with you. He’s your husband after all, and he deserves a chance to be heard,” Susan conceded.

Susan was the voice of reason, and Leona found it difficult to disagree with her. *Could it be possible that I made it all up in my head?* she wondered.

“I’ll try, Susan. It’s hard to talk to him sometimes. Especially when I am thinking he doesn’t want to be married to me. I know it’s made everything worse with his father. I think that’s my fault, too.”

“Nonsense!” Susan retorted. “Milton Carell was playing the victim long before you ever came back to Hunter Springs. Don’t allow him to put that blame on you. He’s making up all of this persecution when the facts don’t bear it out at all.” Susan was disgusted with Milton’s treatment of Nathan and Leona. “You don’t deserve blame for anything,” Susan reassured her, then went on to change the subject.

“I’m having a spot of trouble myself, and I’m hoping you’ll be able to make some suggestions,” she said pointedly to Leona, who reacted with surprise.

“Me? I don’t know how I could possibly help you, but I’m willing to try.” She couldn’t imagine how she could help.

“Actually, it’s about your brother, Will,” Susan began. “He’s very secretive about the cases he’s working on, and seems to resent me following up in John’s office. He claims he doesn’t have to tell me anything. I’ve heard some rumors about him being up to some shady dealings, so I’m naturally concerned about him taking on John’s cases.”

Leona was completely caught off-guard, at first thinking Susan was joking. Laughing, she shook her head. “Will? Oh Susan, Will is just… just Will,” she told her friend. “As for rumors, I don’t believe any of it!

“I know my brother better than anyone in this life. He’s no more

capable of going against the law than your brother was. Honestly, Susan, I don't know where you heard these rumors, but I can tell you they are completely false." She sounded honest beyond a shadow of a doubt.

Leona hoped that her words reassured her friend about Will's integrity. She understood Susan's concerns about Will, given the little she knew of him, but it truly was laughable.

Will? A confidence man? It was preposterous.

Soon the subject changed again, and the two women chatted about various happenings in the news, and in town. Susan, living in the heart of Hunter Springs, knew the latest gossip from church and shops in town. They laughed at some stories that Susan relayed, feeling relaxed and comfortable with one another. After a while, Susan grew serious again.

"I've enjoyed our talk, Leona," she began. "I hope that you and I can continue to meet. I think that we can be friends and support each other. I know I would like that very much." She looked seriously at

Leona, who could do nothing but smile in return.

"I'd like that as well, Susan. You and I will be great friends."

"You know, you're nothing like your brother Will," Susan replied. "He's so closed off and secretive, and you, you're just so open and honest. I really do admire that quality in you, Leona."

Susan stood up and stretched, picking up the tray with the tea service to take it indoors. She stopped, turning back to Leona. "I was just thinking about you and Nathan again, Leona. I think the reason you felt so hurt by Nathan's comment was that you're really and truly in love with him." With that, Susan turned on her heel and strode across the porch to the door.

Leona gasped at Susan's revelation, feeling her heart lurch in her chest. She felt the familiar closing of her throat and the absence of her voice. She tried to speak but couldn't manage to get a word out before Susan disappeared inside the open door.

Leona politely took her leave of Susan Murray without ever

addressing her former comment. She still was unsure how to respond. On one hand, she knew her friend was right, but on the other, Leona was rather surprised that her feelings for Nathan were so obvious. It seemed strange that Susan, a spinster of all people, would be able to discern that in her.

Leona walked back to the boarding house leisurely, window shopping as she went through town, nodding and greeting people she passed with an easy confidence. She truly did love being back in Hunter Springs; she only hoped that whatever was troubling her marriage to Nathan would soon resolve itself so they could get on with their plans to build their home and settle in together.

Leona arrived back at the boarding house to find a note from Nathan: *Disappointed you were gone. I was hoping we could talk on our ride out to the cabin. Will see you tonight. -N.*

Leona read and reread the note, reading between the lines, trying to gain any insight into how her husband was feeling. There was nothing in those lines to give her a clue.

Chapter 24

As the days passed, and nothing was resolved between Leona and Nathan, the rift between them grew wider.

Leona remained quiet and aloof, and Nathan despaired with not understanding what had caused her to pull away. His every attempt to initiate conversation was met with curt, monosyllabic responses, and usually ended with Leona exiting the room as quickly as politely possible. She had relapsed into her former silence, not responding when Milton baited her, simply refusing to speak to either of them.

Milton never let up, hoping each time to get a rise out of Leona. His sinister plotting went on unbeknownst to Nathan and Leona. He was glad they were becoming estranged.

His father hadn't let up on him in recent days; the anniversary of Judith Carell's death was mere days away. This caused Milton to spend even more time wallowing in sorrow, railing against the Groves, and sarcastically shaming his son and Leona both in private and to their faces. Alcohol-fueled rants were to be expected of an evening after Milton spent hours consuming drink after drink, scarcely

touching his dinner.

Leona only came with him to the cabin one day during the week and one weekend day. She still cooked and cleaned for Milton out of a sense of duty. She felt obligated, since she and Nathan had started their marriage there, while her father-in-law had been away in Nevada. She couldn't help wishing that he'd stayed over there and never returned to Hunter Springs.

After the wonderful beginning to her life with Nathan a few short months ago, they had come to this terrible circumstance. Nobody was happy. Leona continued to retreat into her silence as a means to protect herself more and more. It was a state of being that she understood, a way for her to protect her heart. It made her sad that the person she was protecting herself from the most was the very person that she'd come out of her shell and started speaking again for.

After she'd heard him admit to the mistake of marrying her, her heart began to harden.

Why should I bother trying to communicate when he has been keeping

his true feelings to himself the entire time we've been together?

Sadly, Leona couldn't find a positive answer to that question so, she went about her days as quietly as she used to in Ohio, taking care of her and Nathan's home and doing Milton's housekeeping, receiving no acknowledgement or gratitude from either man.

Nathan was less loving towards her, and they both continued to shut one another out of their hearts.

Where will it end? Where is the love we just discovered? Leona wondered.

These days, Nathan's anger, grief, and fear were all just simmering under the surface, ready to break free at a moment's notice. All it took was a sarcastic word, a hard look, a tone in his father's voice to set it off. The contentious arguments with his father had escalated in recent weeks to a nearly unbearable level. Milton, who had already been feeling betrayed by his son for marrying into the Grove family, his greatest enemies, could not abide the care and attention that Nathan was bestowing on the Grove land and the new

home he was building for his bride. He felt further betrayed by the condition of his land in the drought and thought that Nathan was disloyal to his own legacy by letting his family's farm fall to ruin. He had no sympathy for this latest rift between Nathan and Leona.

Nathan hated to admit, even to himself, that he was affected by their lack of communication in a major way. He found it difficult to concentrate at work, his mind puzzling over thoughts of Leona. She was always in the forefront of his mind. The only conclusion that he could logically reach was that his father must have said or done something to upset her, and she didn't want to tell him about it.

After nearly a week of distance between him and his wife, Nathan decided he had to take action. This situation was not resolving itself, and he saw no other way to fix things than to be honest and direct with Leona and tell her how he felt.

They'd started their marriage with such great communication, sharing all their feelings, hopes and dreams. He found that he truly missed their easy discourse, and longed to have things back to the way they'd been. How to accomplish that was the answer that continued to

elude him, no matter how hard he racked his brain for a solution.

It was a bright and sunny June morning when he awoke to the sounds and smells of Leona preparing breakfast in the kitchen. He rose and greeted her with a polite, “Good morning.”

Leona looked up as he entered the room and nodded her response. She set his plate of biscuits and sausage gravy on the table, poured and served his coffee, then removed her apron and prepared to leave the kitchen. It was clear to Nathan that she had no desire to be in the same room with him a moment longer than duty and civility required.

The thought that his wife couldn’t bear to share the same space with him cut Nathan to the quick. He resolved in that instant to put an end to this game once and for all. He spoke sharply when he saw her ready to exit the house, “Leona, wait! I need to speak to you.”

She stopped short of the door and turned to look at him, her face inscrutable.

“Leona please, come and talk to me. We can’t go on like this. I don’t know what has happened to us. I don’t understand why you’re not supporting me. You’re acting like I’m an enemy, and not your husband. I’m not your enemy!” he said with feeling. “Why can’t you help and support me the way that I help you? Don’t you understand what I’ve been going through with my father? I’ve been defending you the entire time.”

Leona registered a shocked look on her face, then anger.

“I… I’ve done nothing but help and support you, Nathan,” she replied. Her face had a high color and her green eyes flashed with annoyance.

“Did my father say or do something?” Nathan asked her. He was sure that his father was at the bottom of whatever was bothering his bride. Why else would she be acting this way?

“No, Nathan, it was you!” Leona cried, nearly sobbing with emotion, her voice breaking. The tears in her eyes made Nathan feel like a monster. The last thing he ever wanted to do was to make Leona

cry.

“Tell me! Leona! Why won’t you just talk to me?” Nathan pleaded with his wife. “Why do you want us to keep hurting each other?”

Leona stood her ground, not speaking right away, but as the tears rolled down her cheeks, she drew a breath and fired.

“You’re the one who hurt me,” Leona shot back. Her posture was stiff and unyielding; she was ready to bolt out the door, not wanting to continue this argument. Nothing was being solved, perhaps it never would be again.

“How?” Nathan was desperate to know.

“I heard you say what you really felt,” Leona said bitterly. She turned her back on her husband, took her sunbonnet off the hook by the kitchen door and hastily tied it on.

Nathan was at a loss. He wasn’t certain he understood exactly

what Leona meant by hearing him say how he really felt. Perhaps she'd overheard a conversation with his father, he couldn't imagine what it was that his wife had surely taken out of context.

Milton and Nathan had been locking horns almost daily, essentially rehashing the same argument over and over. There were certainly some disparaging things said in those confrontations both about Leona and her brother, but Nathan was sure that none of those remarks could possibly have come out of his mouth.

"You just don't understand, Leona. It's the time of year. Everything gets tense in this house! We do it every year on the anniversary of my mother's passing. Papa always gets worse, and we fight even harder. I'm sorry you're caught up in it, but you have to try to understand. My father's grudge is all about losing my mother. I also feel her loss so painfully, still. You just don't know how it feels to lose someone the way I did," Nathan spit back at her. Then, seeing the incredulous look on Leona's face, was immediately contrite.

He mentally chastised himself. *Of course, she knows how it feels! She watched her parents die right in front of her. What a foolish thing to*

say! He wished in that moment that he could simply take back his words or disappear entirely. He felt like even more of a monster when he realized how deeply his words had cut Leona.

She looked like a wounded deer; her face was full of pain, and then, something else. She suddenly seemed like a stranger, closed and cold.

Nathan sprung to his feet, reaching out to his wife. “Leona, I’m sorry! That’s not what I meant.” He stammered out the words, wishing he’d never uttered those hurtful phrases. Leona didn’t wait for his apology but bolted for the back door, running out and into the yard before he could even get the words out.

Nathan watched his wife go out the back door stifling sobs and was crestfallen. *Nice job, Carell!* he told himself, filled with self-loathing. Acting like an insensitive lout was certainly not exclusively his father’s domain. Nathan had proved that morning that the little acorn didn’t fall too far from the tree. He wondered if he would ever be able to fix things with Leona, now that he’d so completely made a fool of himself with careless words.

Would she ever trust him or believe in him again? Or would the tension and distance continue to grow between them until there was nothing left but silence?

Chapter 25

Leona bolted out the back of the Carell property, in such a flurry of emotion and sadness, that she almost collided straight into Milton Carell, who was coming up from the barnyard with an unopened bottle of whiskey in his hand.

She had been looking down as she fled, not seeing him until she was practically upon him. He grabbed her with his free hand, nearly causing her to fall. Leona swung around and stumbled to try and keep her balance. When she realized it was Milton, she reacted with fear and disgust.

“Let me go!” Leona sobbed and twisted to free herself of his grasp. She had to get away, she felt desperate and panicky.

“Just where do you think you’re going, young lady?” Milton sneered at his daughter-in-law.

“Please, just leave me alone! I need to see my brother.”

Leona was openly sobbing now, and for a moment Milton’s heart

softened towards her. He'd always seen her as a haughty, somewhat arrogant young woman, but at this moment he could see that Leona was truly in distress.

"Don't rush off now, Leona. Here, let me help you." Milton sounded sincere, but Leona knew too well how he could act civil, then turn on a dime to treat her with contempt.

She wasn't feeling up to playing his games just then.

"I just want to get my horse. I need to see Will! Please!"

Milton let go of her arm and stepped back.

"I'll saddle your nag for you, Leona. I think leaving here is a good idea. You need to get away." Milton liked the thought of her running away to Will. This meant that he might yet get his wish, of having Nathan back in the family. That Leona and Nathan clearly had experienced a falling out was in his favor, so it behooved him to be nice to the little baggage, to assist her in leaving his property. He turned and began walking toward the barn. In no time, he had Leona's

gelding saddled and was ready to assist her in mounting.

She hesitated for a moment, not wanting Milton to touch her, but reconsidered, since she was not wearing a riding skirt, and she needed his assistance to mount the horse. She took the help, confused by his kindness, but happy to be away from the Carell house as quickly as possible. She thanked him politely as she landed in the saddle, his reply nothing more than a muted grunt. Leona wasted no time in taking the reins. She wheeled the gelding around and headed out to the road and into Hunter Springs at a brisk trot, slowing to a walk as soon as she was out of sight of the Carell property.

Her mind was working as she rode, full of jumbled thoughts of wanting to leave Hunter Springs, regretting that she'd ever come there in the first place, then thinking of the heartbreak that was her marriage to Nathan Carell. All she kept coming back around to was, she needed to get away. She needed to talk to Will and make a plan. She couldn't see herself living the way she had been any longer. She had retreated back into her silence and found no comfort there without the love of her husband Nathan.

Now that she'd lost that, what did she have left in Hunter Springs?

She cried, thinking of how, within such a short time, she had won and lost two men that had the potential to be loving husbands to her. What was left for her without love in her life?

Perhaps she was only meant for a solitary silent life without love. *How could I have been so wrong?* she asked herself. *Thinking that I deserved to have all of this. First my parents, then John. Death and tragedy always. Now Nathan...*

Leona couldn't help but sink even lower as she neared the office of the sheriff, where Will was working.

The Arizona sun was high in the sky when Leona pulled her horse into the shade of the livery barn. The boy knew her well and greeted her politely as he took the horse to water.

"Good day, Mrs. Carell," he said. "Will you want him put up for the night?"

Her usual routine was to bring the horse back late in the afternoon, and the young man was surprised to see her arrive so early in the day. It was none of his business, he just was curious as to the change of routine.

“Yes, please, Johnny,” Leona replied. “I’ll not be leaving town anymore today.” She handed over the reins and tipped the boy a nickel.

He smiled warmly as he placed it into his pocket.

“Thank you, ma’am.” He had a little spring to his step as he led the horse away to his assigned stall.

Leona made her way to the boarding house to freshen up before going to see her brother at his office in the Sheriff’s Department. Will was building a reputation in Hunter Springs as a capable lawyer, and it wouldn’t do for his sister to show up sniveling and disheveled at his place of business. Leona tidied her hair and washed her face, changing into a suitable clean morning dress. She picked a parasol out of the umbrella stand by the door and tied on a matching bonnet. She

checked the results in the mirror on the stand, and satisfied that she didn't look like a distraught runaway wife, she closed and locked the door behind her, placing the key into the reticule on her wrist.

Seeing her landlady on the stairs above, she waved and greeted her as she descended to the street level once again and made her way to the sheriff's office. Leona felt a little bit bad for passing her landlady so rudely, but she was still in a highly emotional state and knew that she wouldn't be able to make small talk. The urgency she felt to get away, to get to Will's office and make her plans was overwhelming even her common courtesy.

She hurried down the block to the sheriff's office, only to find the deputy there. Deputy Moore had worked with John Murray, the late sheriff, as a clerk and assistant. He'd been working as the interim sheriff until a suitable replacement for Sheriff Murray could be found. Deputy Moore had no desire for the title of sheriff but stayed on out of a sense of duty to keep the peace and enforce the laws. He honored the memory of his predecessor by taking his cases to closure with the assistance of the newest attorney appointed to his office, Will Grove.

“Good day, Mrs. Carell,” the deputy greeted her. “How are you on this fine day?”

Leona took a breath and tried to be as light and airy in her response as possible. “Good day to you, Deputy, is my brother here?”

She didn’t see Will at his desk. The deputy shook his head.

“Sorry Mrs. Carell, Will isn’t here. He’s gone off to take care of some personal business. Not sure when he’ll be back. You’re welcome to have a seat and wait here for him if you like. I’d enjoy the company.”

Deputy Moore smiled kindly and offered Leona a cup of tea or coffee, which she declined, and made small talk while she waited for Will to return.

Leona tried to distract herself with conversation with the older man, but her emotions kept her fidgeting and shifting around in her seat. To his credit, Deputy Moore did his level best to keep her engaged. Complimenting her and asking about the home-building out

in the canyon.

“I’m sure glad that grand old place is being rebuilt,” he began. “I knew your parents, you know. They were a fine couple. You favor your mother so much. I almost thought it was her coming into the office earlier.”

His mention of Leona’s parents brought back her grief and worry. She smiled and tried to be polite, but anxiety was growing within her.

“How long has Will been gone?” she asked. “I’m afraid I cannot wait much longer.”

The deputy had no definite answer for her. Leona was disappointed, but unsurprised. This was how life was for her just now. Nothing seemed to be working out in her favor. Impatience got the better of her after about thirty minutes of waiting. She rose from her chair and made her excuses.

“I’m afraid I must go, Deputy Moore, I’ve taken up enough of your valuable time for the day. If you could spare a pen and paper, I’d

like to leave a message for my brother."

Deputy Moore seemed disappointed, but quickly handed her paper and a pen. Leona scribbled her message, blotted the ink, then after a pause to let the ink dry, folded the paper and left it on Will's desk. She set a glass paperweight on top of it, then said her goodbyes to the deputy.

"Thank you for your time, Deputy Moore. I enjoyed our visit," she fibbed a little, to make the deputy feel better. She knew he, for one, had enjoyed the interruption.

"Good day to you, Mrs. Carell. I'll be sure to tell Will you were here looking for him, and direct him to the message."

The deputy shook Leona's hand and showed her out the door. Leona opened her parasol against the Arizona sun and, having nowhere else to go, strolled back to the boarding house rooms that she shared with her husband, hoping to catch a glimpse of her brother returning to town.

There was hardly anyone on the street, and Will was nowhere to be found.

Oh! Where could he be for so long? Personal business?

Perhaps he was making plans without her. She couldn't understand why he would be on personal business that she didn't know about. Realizing Will had a life she wasn't privy to was quite disheartening.

Leona began to sink even deeper into despair, trudging towards the house, being dusted by the desert wind and beaten by the Arizona sun.

Chapter 26

Nathan had retreated to his bedroom when Leona left. He didn't watch where she went—he didn't want to know, really—and he assumed she would return soon.

But when she didn't return for several hours, he began to feel like something was amiss. He began to pace up and down the floor, from the inside of his bedroom out to the kitchen door, repeatedly. He couldn't remain still; he was filled with worry and regret.

The words he'd spoken to his wife echoed in his mind, he wished more than anything that he could take them all back. The last thing he'd wanted to do was to drive Leona away, but he could hardly blame her. *Why would she want to stay in a place like this, filled with anger and bitterness?*

Nathan wished he had never brought Leona to stay at the cabin. He regretted exposing her to his father's hatred. If only they'd stayed in town together, they might have been happy.

Too late for second guesses, Nathan, he told himself. *How will I ever*

make things right with her?

The answers eluded him as he continued to replay their earlier conversation over and over in his mind. The feeling of dread inside him that he might have driven his bride away for good began to grow as the time passed and Leona didn't come back inside.

Each time Nathan entered the kitchen he peered out at the barn for a sign that his wife had returned. He scanned the road to the farm for signs of her, to no avail. He guessed she'd gone to her thinking place and would be returning… or would she?

The question loomed large in his mind. He hoped against hope that she would be coming back. He couldn't be certain; he'd never had a disagreement with Leona before. He didn't know how she reacted under stress, or how she might act when angry.

Clearly, her decision to leave after his insensitive remarks was an effort Leona made to protect herself. It sent Nathan further into despair thinking that she would have to protect herself from him, of all people.

Maybe I'm not so different from my father, after all, he thought.

After several hours had passed with no sign of Leona, Nathan became convinced that Leona wouldn't be returning, not that day, perhaps not at all. After the way he'd mucked everything up and failed in trying to talk to her that morning, he honestly didn't blame her. *Why would she want to come back?*

His father had come into the house awhile after Leona had stormed out, looking sly and smug. He said nothing to Nathan but went straight to the sideboard to get a glass. In the hours since Leona left, Milton had consumed more than half the bottle of whiskey he'd brought into the house. Nathan usually dreaded being around his father when he'd been drinking, but that afternoon, he cared for nothing but the return of his wife.

He waited impatiently, pacing constantly, with an inner voice railing at him, berating him for a fool and a bad husband. He just couldn't keep his mouth shut, and now Leona was gone. After nearly two more hours of this agitation, pacing, and negative self-talk,

Nathan's limited patience had run out.

He decided that staying around any longer at the cabin was an exercise in futility, and his best bet was to saddle his horse, go to town and find his wife. He figured she'd gone to her brother for solace and would end her day at the boarding house. Nathan felt desperate to get there.

He needed to convince Leona that he loved her and wanted to repair what had gone wrong between them. He only hoped it wasn't too late. He didn't know what he would do if he lost his Leona for good. He didn't even want to consider that as any kind of reality in the future. He'd waited so long to have her back, and he needed to convince her to stay. He was willing to do anything to keep her with him.

Nathan grabbed a few belongings and stuffed them into his saddle bags that were hanging by the back door. He looked for his jacket there on the hook, but it was missing. He ducked back into his bedroom and took the jacket off the hook behind the door. Shrugging it on, he bustled back out only to meet Milton, coming out of his own

bedroom.

“Where are you going?” Milton was a bit unsteady on his feet.

“I’m going to get Leona,” Nathan replied, not wanting to stand and talk; he had to ride out now to get to his wife.

“Boy! You do that and you’re weak! You’ve always let that little baggage manipulate you. She’s got you to where you don’t know if you’re coming or going.” Milton lost his balance for a second, and leaned on the wall for support, squinting to keep his son in focus.

Nathan bristled at the remarks but knowing his father was inebriated, didn’t engage with him.

“I’m not having this conversation with you, Papa. Leona’s my wife. I said some unkind things to her this morning, and I need to go make things right with her now. I am going to our rooms in town. You’ll be on your own tonight. Try not to burn the house down, will you?”

Nathan pushed past his father, who puffed out his chest and made another comment, completely confusing Nathan.

"You just need to grow up and realize that your Grove girl is just as rotten as her entire rotten family is. I swear, I should have taken care of those kids when I had the chance. I helped that little so-and-so saddle her horse, did you know that?" Milton hiccupped and cleared his throat, his eyes closed.

"She rode out of here at a good clip. The sooner she leaves here, the better off we will be. I sent her on her way. I hope she falls down the canyon and breaks her fool neck, that's what I hope. That witch! Thinking she can come into my home! You should never have brought her here!"

Nathan was incensed at his father's rant.

"Stop it! Just stop." Nathan was puzzled by his father's words, but just wanted him to stop insulting Leona. "That's my wife you're insulting. You need to stop."

Milton scowled at Nathan. “I’ll insult the family that killed my wife all I want to, and you’ll not stop me!” Milton’s exclamation was followed by him hurling the bottle in his hand against the wall behind Nathan’s head. Nathan wanted to punch his father, but restrained himself.

“I don’t have time for your nonsense right now, Papa. I’ve got to go,” he raised his voice in anger.

Milton sneered. “You’d have time now if you weren’t so idiotic. Don’t you see? You’ve ruined everything. I could have gotten rid of that witch Leona when I had the chance.”

Milton looked smugly at Nathan who couldn’t seem to wrap his head around what his father meant.

“Just what in the heck are you talking about?” Nathan asked.

Milton just smirked and said nothing, retreating back into his room, muttering.

Nathan couldn't deal with his father any longer. He didn't know what the old man meant with all his cryptic comments, and at the moment he didn't care.

"I've got to go," was all he said, tersely. He pushed past Milton and ran out to the barn to saddle his horse.

When he got into the barn, he could see that Leona's horse was gone, so then he knew for sure that she wouldn't be back to the homestead anytime soon. He hurriedly brushed and saddled his gelding, Boss. He didn't bother with the usual routine he had with his horse, to pet him and feed him carrots from the barrel in the corner of the barn. Boss was dancing a bit in the barn aisle. He could feel the tension and desperation that Nathan was broadcasting to him, and it made him a bit tense as well.

"Easy, Boss," Nathan tried to soothe him. Attaching his saddle bags on the saddle, in no time he was ready to mount up for the ride into Hunter Springs.

Boss was full of energy, and they took off down the road at a

quick gallop.

Nathan didn't try to slow his horse. Reveling in the feeling of the wind in his face and the power of his horse beneath him, he encouraged Boss to maintain that speed. They practically flew down the road until Nathan pulled Boss up as they came to the steep and winding switchback trail coming down the canyon wall. It wouldn't do for Boss to get hurt, and Nathan didn't relish the idea of being thrown should his horse stumble on the steep trail. Always a good horseman, Nathan didn't push Boss until they got down onto a safer footing in the flatter part of the trail. Then they picked up speed again.

Galloping along, Nathan felt even more urgency, the closer they got to town. His mind raced, even as his horse did, thinking of all the things he needed to say to his wife. He had enough time to rehearse them in his mind and a couple of times out loud as he rode.

He was glad he didn't meet anyone coming the other direction, he knew he'd sure look foolish to a passerby! Not that he truly cared. He felt hopeful that he knew exactly what he would say to Leona

when he saw her, if he was able to remember the words when it mattered the most. He didn't even know if he'd be able to find her. Then, if and when he did, if she would even be willing to listen to what he had to say.

He hoped he'd have the chance to get his speech out. The most important thing in the world to Nathan was to find Leona and make things right with her again.

He breathed a silent prayer that he wasn't going to be too late.

Chapter 27

Leona took her time walking back to the boarding house after her visit with Deputy Moore. His reminiscence of her childhood home and parents had brought a new wave of grief and emotion to wash over her; she found herself walking slowly as she was lost in thought and emotion.

She had made a polite exit as soon as she realized that Will wasn't coming back, trying to be gracious, while inside she was in turmoil.

It wasn't only the talk of her parents that had magnified the emotions she had been already dealing with since the encounter with Nathan, then with his father, earlier that morning, that had her on edge. It was also the extreme lack of confidence and insecurity she'd been feeling since she had overheard Nathan that night saying he'd made a mistake. This lack of confidence caused her to retreat inward more in recent days. She sunk back into her old ways of grief and coping, losing her voice again, retreating into the dark and familiar silence where she'd spent the past half a decade. It wasn't a happy place, but it was familiar.

Leona hated feeling this way, but she didn't know how else to cope. Reverting to silence had been the only thing that saved and protected her when her parents died. Now, sadly, she needed to protect her heart from her own husband! She shook her head at the irony of it.

She'd been so sure that marrying Nathan and staying in Hunter Springs was the right thing to do. She and Nathan had grown close so quickly. Almost as if no time at all had passed since they were teenagers and separated by the disaster that took her parents' lives. They'd remained close in heart even when they were separated by an entire country. When they came back together it had felt so right. Leona had felt instantly cared for and safe. She could feel her voice coming back to her and the words suddenly flooded the curve of her mouth, escaping her lips, as she and Nathan communicated. She came out of her shell much faster than either of them had ever expected.

How quickly it had gone wrong.

Leona was puzzled about Milton's apparent change of heart, his

strange behavior that morning, being helpful instead of hateful. It was so out of character for him. Leona couldn't find an answer to the question of why he'd changed his attitude towards her. She began to replay the conversation with Nathan in the kitchen. How could he have been so insensitive? The Nathan Leona loved had always put her first, had guarded her and protected her emotionally and physically. She couldn't help but wonder what had made him change.

Why does he think that marrying me was a mistake? Has his father finally convinced him that my family is the enemy? Now he's completely entrenched in the enemy camp, perhaps he's looking for a way out.

Nothing had been quite the same since Milton's return. Nathan's father had done nothing but try to poison Nathan's mind against her and her family since the moment he'd come back from Nevada. She couldn't help wishing he'd stayed there. Things were going so well for the three of them, their plans were coming together, and the future looked bright for them. Now, Leona saw nothing but hurt and pain when she tried to see her future with Nathan. She was questioning all of her choices since deciding to leave Ohio.

Nothing had turned out well for her, it seemed.

She wished that Will had been at his office. He had always been her rock, her biggest supporter and he understood her better than anyone else in her life. She sometimes thought that Will knew her better than she knew herself.

Where could he be? Leona kept looking back towards the sheriff's office and along the broad main street as she walked along to see if she could spot her brother. She had no idea where he might have gone. "Personal business" might have been the wrong description of her brother's errand. She couldn't imagine Will keeping any secrets from her. Perhaps he was conducting research for a legal matter. That sounded infinitely more plausible to her sense of reason.

Leona walked along, letting her attention drift at a storefront. She saw herself reflected in the dress shop window. A lovely green day gown caught her eye as she passed, and she stopped to admire how it looked on the mannequin. For a moment, she thought about going inside the dress shop, but reconsidered. She didn't need another dress, she just wanted to see Will. She looked up and down the street again,

then started for the boarding house.

As she neared the end of the block, she heard a voice calling her name on the otherwise quiet street. She turned to see Susan Murray waving at her. Susan gathered up her skirts and crossed the street to where Leona stood.

“Good day, Susan! Are you all right?”

Leona’s friend was red in the face and out of breath standing before her. She had an angry expression, her lips tight. Leona was distressed at the sight.

“Did something happen?” Leona asked again.

Susan blurted out, “Oh! Leona, it’s that brother of yours!” She blushed furiously, her fists at her side clenching and unclenching.

Leona froze at the sound of her brother’s name. “What about Will?” She was tense and frightened to hear the answer.

“He’s—” Susan stammered. “He’s just *stupid*, that’s what he is!” She looked like she could burst into tears at any moment, then, seeing Leona’s distraught face, came back to herself. Susan took a couple of deep breaths as she studied Leona’s expression. Leona realized then that something was dreadfully wrong with her friend.

“Leona, I’m all right, I guess I should be asking you the same question. Are you all right? You look upset.”

Susan linked her arm through Leona’s and guided her into the shade of the store awning.

“Can you tell me what’s happened?” Susan showed true concern and compassion for Leona. It was nice to have someone care about how she felt.

“I don’t know, Susan, I’m feeling like maybe I didn’t make the right choice in coming back here. It’s not turning out the way I hoped it would.”

Susan nodded her head. “I can imagine, Leona. You’ve had a lot

to contend with since coming back. We all have."

Susan bowed her head, thinking of her brother John. Leona hugged her friend. She began to confide her story about Nathan and Milton, how she'd overheard Nathan say he'd made a mistake. How she couldn't speak to him and the rift between them grew wider. Susan didn't interrupt, only nodded her understanding of what Leona had been going through.

Susan's face was thoughtful, as she paused in reflection for a moment, before saying, "The reasons you came here were all good ones. You've just had to change your plans some. I think you need to talk with your husband. I know he thinks the sun rises and sets with you. It must just be a grave misunderstanding. If you talk it out, you'll be fine, I'm certain of it."

"Would you like to come home with me? I'd love to have you for tea," Leona invited Susan.

"No, thank you, dear. I've got to be getting home now. I will call on you tomorrow, if that's all right?"

Leona thought about it for a second. “I guess I’m not going anywhere. I’ll either be here or in the canyon at the homestead. You can bet I won’t be at my father-in-law’s house.”

Leona laughed ruefully. “Though I suppose it depends on how well my talk with Nathan goes. I must have been fooling myself thinking I could just leave him. Where would I go? This is my home. He is my home.”

Leona’s eyes welled with tears. It must be a misunderstanding. She would soon get to the bottom of things.

“It’s just hard to talk about my emotions. I’ve gotten good at burying mine in silence,” Leona confessed.

“Just remember to talk to him. Speak from your heart. Remember, he’s the one who helped you find your voice again,” Susan reminded her. “If you really love him, the words will come. You’ll be all right, I just know you will,” Susan said with confidence that Leona simply didn’t feel.

Leona thought about Susan's words.

"You know, you're right; I am going to talk to Nathan, and stop being foolish."

As Susan embraced her, she whispered in Susan's ear, "You should take your own advice and try it with Will."

Susan gasped, her mouth working, but no words came. Leona noted the high blush in her cheeks, and she knew she'd hit the nail on the head.

Susan and Will.

He could do worse, Leona mused. Susan was lovely, and a dear friend who didn't deserve spinsterhood.

Leona wondered if Susan had rejected any suitors, or if there was a tragic love story in her past that would explain why she'd never married. After all, Susan was an attractive woman, not too old;

although Leona had never asked her, she guessed that Susan was only five or six years older than her. Susan was also intelligent and thoughtful, as well as educated.

The best part was, they were already friends. Leona could easily accept Susan as a sister. She liked her a great deal. She would have to discuss this possibility with Will when she finally caught up to him.

Leona was happy to have Susan for a friend and thought she and Will would make a good match. There was something, however, or someone, which was trying to get in the way of them being together, and Leona was determined to get to the bottom of that. Will shouldn't be alone in that big house he was building.

Susan would be perfect for him, Leona thought. She seemed determined to help make that happen, and for a moment forgot about her own problems.

Leona turned to go with a last squeeze of Susan's hand.

"Goodbye, Susan, I'll look forward to having you for tea

tomorrow," she said graciously.

Susan was still blushing and smiled prettily.

As Leona turned to take leave of her friend, she heard Susan call to her, "I never said I loved him!"

Leona waved and said nothing, resuming her walk home with a small smile playing upon her lips.

Chapter 28

Nathan rode the last leg of the distance into town with his father's words echoing in his head.

What did he mean about the Groves' death? Could he have been responsible for the fire?

Nathan couldn't believe that his father would resort to violence. He'd always threatened, but Nathan mostly thought of his threats as benign expressions of his inner turmoil. Nathan's mind refused to accept what he most feared. He would sort things out with Leona, then go dig up the truth from his father. Milton Carell certainly had some questions and accusations to answer for.

When Nathan reached the outskirts of Hunter Springs, he spied Will Grove riding towards him. Nathan pulled his horse up and Will approached.

Nathan was relieved to see him, wanting to talk to him about the problems he was having with Leona. He knew Will understood his wife better than anyone, he hoped he would have some insight.

Nathan stepped off his horse.

“Hello, Will. I was hoping to see you–” Nathan’s words trailed off when he saw the rage in Will’s face.

Will jumped to the ground and approached Nathan on foot.

Nathan was the first to speak, “Do you know where Leona is? What has happened?”

Nathan felt a knot in the pit of his stomach looking at Will. He knew whatever had happened was not good.

Will spat on the ground and drew himself up to his fullest height, looking ready to do battle.

“I just got back to town, only to be told my sister was there looking for me, distraught and worried. What did you do to her?” Will’s tone was accusatory and sharp.

“I can’t talk about it now, Will,” Nathan replied. “I’m going to

see her right away." He turned and gathered his reins to mount his horse again.

Will stepped in front of Nathan, effectively blocking his path.

"I know what you did!" shouted Will. "I've almost got enough proof to put you and your evil father away for the rest of your rotten lives. Marrying my sister to try and hide the truth didn't work, did it? I'm onto you now!" Will's tone was bitter and sharp.

"I have no idea what you are talking about," Nathan replied. "I love your sister and was just coming to find her. We had an argument and that's why she was looking for you. I am going to try to make up with her now."

Will rolled his eyes at Nathan's claim, not believing a word of it.

"Will, please move out of my way, I need to find Leona." Nathan had run out of patience. Will's accusations, along with Milton's earlier comments had his mind reeling. "Move now, Will."

Nathan took a step to push Will out of his way and found himself flying backwards as Will shoved him as hard as he could.

Nathan was only able to keep his feet underneath him because he was holding onto Boss' reins. The big horse took a step backwards as Nathan was pushed back.

"What is wrong with you, Will?" Nathan yelled at his brother-in-law. "Stop it, I don't want to fight with you. I just need to see your sister!"

Before he could say anything else he was stunned to hear Will accuse his father of murder. "He did it! He set the fire, it wasn't just lightning which struck the house, Milton started the fire which killed our parents. And here you are, covering for him all this time! How can you live with yourself? Your father is not only a drunk–he's a *murderer*." Will hissed the last words with bitterness and rage.

Nathan didn't know what to say, he simply reacted. His body moved of its own accord, as if the insult to Milton had been directed at Nathan himself. He shoved past Will Grove, holding back from

striking a blow, grabbed up his reins and mounted his horse. He headed for the livery stable without a look back.

Nathan could hear Will cursing and yelling after him, but his one thought was to get to Leona. He had to talk to her, it was the only thing that mattered.

Nathan found Leona, as he expected to, in their rooms at the boarding house.

He entered the room, finding it dark and quiet. At first, he didn't think Leona was there, but as his eyes adjusted to the dim interior, he saw Leona. She was curled up in the overstuffed armchair, wrapped in a shawl. He could see that she was awake, her eyes were open, but she didn't greet him. Nathan wasn't sure how to proceed, especially in light of Will Grove's accusation about his father. He knew that he had to talk to her about that before Will got there and filled her mind with the idea that he was somehow complicit in their parents' deaths. He was most certainly going to lose her completely if that happened. He needed her to hear it from him.

“Leona, I’m so glad I found you here. I was so worried when you didn’t come back today,” he began. “I know I’ve handled things badly, and I just want to tell you that I am so sorry. Can’t we talk about it now?” Nathan pleaded with his wife, but her face was impassive.

He continued with the worst part of the conversation. “Will accosted me as I entered town. He’s got some kind of sick notion that my father is responsible for the fire at your house. I can’t imagine why, but he thinks I am protecting him. We had words and almost came to blows over it.”

At this, Leona sat straight up in the chair, her eyes wide.

“Will you come back to the cabin with me? I just want the three of us to sit down together and talk things through. It has to be all right, doesn’t it Leona? I don’t want to live without you by my side, will you please come?”

Leona took in what Nathan said, her thoughts racing. Will was a principled attorney. He wouldn’t accuse someone of a crime unless he had proof. The encounters she’d had with Milton Carell told her that

he was certainly capable of doing great evil, but Nathan? She was uncertain about him. She loved him and couldn't believe he was complicit. He'd only been a lad when the tragedy occurred and had cared deeply about Leona and her family even then. She still wished to speak to Will, now, more than ever, but for now, she didn't want to talk to Nathan anymore. At least not until she knew what her brother knew.

"I don't want to talk to you right now, Nathan. I've got a lot on my mind. I need to speak to my brother before you and I can resolve anything between us. No. I will not go back with you today. I think you should go now. Spend a couple of nights in the canyon. I'll stay here."

As Nathan rose to object, she added, "I'll be fine here. Susan is coming to visit tomorrow, and I'll come up for the Fourth of July Independence Day celebration. It's only two days from now. By then, I will be able to talk with you, I think. Please go now, I'm tired of talking."

Leona lay back against the chair cushions and closed her eyes.

She was having a hard time taking in everything Nathan had said. She couldn't form a thought while looking into his brown eyes. It would be better if he stayed away a couple of days to let her get things straight before they tried to reconcile.

With Will's accusation on top of everything else, it was almost too much to bear.

Nathan reluctantly agreed to his wife's request and gathered a change of clothes and some food from the larder and took his leave of her.

"All right, Leona, I'll be waiting for you on the Fourth of July. No matter what Will thinks or tells you, I promise you I had nothing to do with anything my father might or might not have done. If Will has proof to show me, I will haul Papa to jail myself. I swear it," Nathan vowed.

He took Leona's hand and kissed it, then dropped a kiss on the top of her head as she was seated in the armchair. She said nothing as he picked up his re-packed saddle bags and left to get his horse.

Leona spent the next day cleaning and tidying up and fixing a tea for the afternoon visit from her friend Susan Murray. Will had not materialized at her door after Nathan left to go back up the canyon, and Leona was filled with anxiety about what she would learn when he finally did arrive. She decided not to bother him at work again, since he had her message, and she didn't relish the idea of talking with Deputy Moore again so soon. Instead, she busied herself around the tiny abode, prepared the tea and waited for one of them, either Susan or Will, to come knocking.

Susan arrived just as Leona put on the pot. She bustled in, full of compassion and concern. Leona told her that she'd not felt up to talking to Nathan and had sent him away for a couple of days.

Susan clicked her tongue and shook her head. "Oh, Leona, I hope that wasn't a mistake. If you like, I can go with you when you return. For moral support."

Leona thanked her, then declined, "It's all right, Susan. Even one night alone here has shown me that I would much really rather be

with Nathan. I don't like being away from him. I still have to talk to my brother before I talk to Nathan again, but rest assured, I will definitely take your advice tomorrow."

The two women enjoyed their tea in a comfortable silence, with Susan remarking only on how light and delicious the cake was, and how much she liked the decor in the rented suite of rooms. Leona broke the silence by saying that she was looking forward to the Fourth of July; she expected to see some of her childhood friends.

Susan replied, "It will be so much fun to celebrate out in the canyon with you and your neighbors. I am looking forward to it!"

Just as Leona was about to agree, her thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door.

Chapter 29

Will Grove entered, looking both happy and then a bit peeved to see Susan in his sister's sitting room.

"Good day, Miss Murray," he greeted her.

"Good day to you, Mr. Grove," Susan replied. "I hope you are well. I see you've been doing a lot of work at the Sheriff's Department of late, have you closed all of my brother's cases by now?"

Will frowned at the question, but politely answered, "I have a few that still require my attention, Miss Murray, but I won't trouble you with the details."

His business with Leona being pressing, he made a request of her visitor. "Miss Murray, I have an extremely urgent matter to discuss with my sister, may I beg your indulgence? I hate to break up your visit, but this cannot wait." Will looked expectantly at Susan, who, having finished her tea, rose to take her leave.

"Of course, Mr. Grove. Leona, thank you for the visit," she said

gracefully.

Leona thanked her graciously, reminding her friend to join her at the Fourth of July celebration at the homestead this weekend, and bid her farewell.

After Susan departed, Will spent two hours with Leona explaining to her why she wasn't able to find him the previous day. He had indeed been off doing research for a case, and it was the case against Milton Carell.

During their long conversation, Will insisted, and was convinced, that Milton Carell was responsible for the fire, and subsequent death of their parents. He talked for a long while, and yet he avoided laying out all of the details to Leona, who was moved to tears by his revelation. After words could no longer suffice to describe the feelings or wishes and regrets of the two siblings, Will took his leave, wanting to be back at the homestead before nightfall.

"I am sure this is hard for you to take in, sis. It was hard for me at first, too. I still am not certain that Nathan had anything to do with

it, but those Carells are two of a kind after all…" he pondered out loud.

"No, Will!" Leona retorted. "Nathan would never harm me or our family. I know he is innocent, and I know you'll prove that when you prove his father guilty."

Leona was adamant, showing not a moment's hesitation as she blamed her father-in-law for a heinous crime. She felt to her core that her husband was free of any guilt in this matter.

"No matter what has happened between Nathan and me, I know he loves me. He's always loved me," she insisted.

Will felt weary. "Let's talk more tomorrow, all right? I'm getting tired."

Leona hugged her brother, and he kissed her on her tear-stained cheek and waited as she locked the door behind him before heading down to the street level and back to the homestead for the night.

The next morning, Leona got an early start. She'd baked a pie and made sandwiches to deliver. She hired a pony cart to take her up the canyon, as there were too many bundles to manage alone with just her saddle bags. It was a good thing she'd learned to drive a carriage, a skill she felt that independent ladies ought to possess. She was thankful that the stable boy on duty wasn't Johnny, but another boy filling in for him. She didn't want to answer questions about why she was traveling alone without her husband.

She enjoyed the solitude as they navigated the road. The clopping of the pony's hooves on the hard ground was in an even rhythm, and the cool morning breeze was welcome and belied the heat that they would be expecting later in the day. Leona had several things weighing heavily on her mind, but it seemed a sin to ignore the beauty of nature in selfishness of her own human problems. She had a few thoughts about the day.

Celebrating Independence Day was important to the townspeople. There had been many battles fought to afford her the right to be where she was that very day. She honored the struggle and sacrifice of her forefathers who had won independence. Then her

mind settled back to brooding about her own struggles with Will and Nathan, the accusations about Milton. She had a hard time even thinking about him being a murderer! Her own father-in-law, the man who Nathan loved so deeply despite what he had done.

However, thinking back to his sinister remarks, his hatred of her family, the long-standing feud over the land and the well, it began to make sense to her.

If Will believes it, it must be true.

She was a bit terrified to think that he had gotten away with arson and worse, for all these years, and had not been made to answer for his crimes. What might he have done to her in those times he'd confronted her alone? She shivered at the thought.

As she approached the enclave of homes in the canyon, she could see that her neighbors had gone all out for the holiday. There were streamers and bunting on houses and gates and people milling around in the road near the church. The celebration was in severe contrast to the turmoil and sadness Leona was feeling. She put on a brave face to

get through it.

Several buggies had stopped and there was a bit of a roadblock to getting past the church. Leona didn't mind since the food she'd prepared was to be left here, anyway. She pulled her pony into the side yard next to the church and a boy came to hold the reins and help her out of the cart. She took her food into the dining hall of the church as the boy offered the pony some water, then tied him up on the lawn.

Leona dropped off her food offerings and greeted the church ladies. As she exited the door, an older couple recognized her. She couldn't remember their names, but they knew her. She figured they must have been friends of her parents, and warmly returned their greeting. They told her that someone was looking for her, not her brother. Leona figured it must have been her husband, and her spirits rose. She was looking forward to seeing him. She set out on foot, taking a shortcut across a neighboring field to get to the homestead more quickly.

Leona found herself feeling a bit more determined to rise above

all the nonsense between her and Nathan. Hadn't he come home to try to fix things with her? Surely, he wanted the same thing. As she walked home, she picked up her pace a little.

Suddenly, for some inexplicable reason, she felt a sudden urgency to see Nathan, to speak to him of what was in her heart. She realized then that she couldn't leave Hunter Springs. There really wasn't anywhere that she could go where she might solve anything. Running from difficulties would only mean that her past would follow right behind her.

It was up to her to face her troubles head-on, and with Nathan by her side. She knew that silence had never been the solution. It was a way to cope, without having to address the issues she was up against. Now, she had a good man who loved her, and she admitted to herself, she deeply loved him too. That's why she had felt so hurt when she'd overheard his remark about the mistake. How foolish of her it was to assume that everything revolved around her! Nathan certainly had more problems than she even realized, and Leona could only hope and pray that their love was strong enough for them to be able to overcome their troubles together.

Some inner homing instinct took Leona through the paths she'd walked as a child, as she daydreamed and pondered about her and Nathan. The path unfolded in front of her as it had done so many times before, drawing her near the man she had come to love so deeply. Her feet knew the way home.

The day was warm and breezy, and the hum of insects and the song of birds surrounded her. Leona was oblivious to the beauty of nature, simply putting one foot in front of the other, her mind lost in thought, and her body acting for her as her sturdy leather lace-up shoes carried her securely down the path.

Before long, she could see the fence that bordered the land that was her childhood home. The burnt ruins still piled here and there around where the newly rebuilt Grove house had now begun to take shape. The jagged, unfinished silhouette rose in the distance, backed by trees and sky. Leona's heart leapt in her chest at the sight.

She stopped and stared at the beginnings of what was obviously going to be a lovely home: a stately, but not ostentatious, design that

was taking shape day by day. Leona hadn't seen the work-in-progress for several days, so she followed the trail in through the turnstile and up the garden path until she reached the yard. She thought to go knock at Will's cabin, but decided to make the circuit of the building, then go across to the Carells'. She hoped that Nathan's father had already gone over to the church. Not one to miss a free meal, it was likely that Milton would not be at home. Leona hoped that meant that Nathan would be alone, and she could speak to him privately there. They had a great deal to talk about.

Leona approached the Grove house from the front. The doorway led to a spacious foyer with the staircase taking off to the left and a hallway to the right. The hallway had been framed with walls and ceiling rafters and Leona could make out where the downstairs rooms would be located. Pleased with the progress she observed, she walked into the parlor and looked around at the window frames and other details that had been accomplished since she'd last been there. The parlor doorway beckoned her into the first-floor hallway to the kitchen. Leona knew that until Will got married, she would probably be spending a fair amount of time cooking in that kitchen, so she had a curiosity about how it was coming along. Leona had given her

suggestions when Will was drawing up the new plans.

It was then she heard a sound from outside the kitchen. Knowing it was a holiday and there would be no workmen present, she turned to investigate. As she exited the kitchen, however, she was met with a sight she had never believed she would witness...

Chapter 30

Nathan hadn't made any plans about where to meet Leona, so when she didn't come to the cabin, he went ahead to the church. His hope was that he might meet her along the way, then they could go back to their homestead, and talk. He thought Leona would be more comfortable in her thinking place, and he had a few updates to the construction project that he wanted to show her.

He had misgivings about speaking with her after she'd so firmly rejected him at the boarding house. Still, he didn't know what else to do. It seemed he spent a great deal of time trying to make things right with Leona. *If only I wasn't so hardheaded, I might not have to keep trying to make up to Leona. Maybe this time I'll finally get it right,* he chided himself. He worried that Leona really would leave him. The days they'd spent apart were some of the worst in his life. He knew in his heart that he and Leona were meant to be together, he'd always known it; the thought that he had hurt her, or worse risked never seeing her again were more than he could bear. He said a brief prayer that Leona would see it that way, too. He never wanted to be without her. Not for even one day.

Nathan shaved, bathed, and put his Sunday best suit of clothes on. He wanted to look good for Leona. He took the time to shine his belt buckle and his boots while he waited for her to arrive.

He had heard Milton leave the house and ride away earlier that morning, but had stayed in his room, not wishing to confront his father just yet. His conversations with Leona and Will kept going round and round in his mind; they had kept him awake for most of the night.

Sometime in the early morning hours before dawn, he had come to a decision. If Milton was truly guilty of the arson fire at the Groves, then Nathan wanted him to face the consequences for his crimes. His actions–if they were his–had taken lives, and he just couldn't overlook that. He knew his father thought that his loyalty should lie with his kin and his blood family, but he couldn't help thinking about all the loss that Leona and Will had had to bear. If Milton did commit arson and murder, and Nathan had begun to think it was a real possibility, let him pay. Nathan could not defend him against such a sin. He still couldn't believe it, but he was trying to be open-minded about what Will might know.

Let Will bring undeniable proof of Milton's crimes, and he would agree to hand his father over to the law. Today, though, he was going to focus on reaching an understanding with his wife, and then he would be better prepared to deal with his problems with his father. With that thought, he spared one last glance at the inside of his house, before stepping over the threshold, closing the door behind him.

It had been nearly six years since the tragedy, one more day wouldn't make a difference to anything by his reasoning and logic. He looked for Leona as he walked but saw no sign of her.

The sound of laughing children greeted him as he approached the church. It looked like everyone that lived in the canyon and some of their friends and families had turned out to celebrate. People were greeting each other, gathering in small groups to visit. Families with small children stayed off to the side of the lawn, playing. There was a small band of musicians providing upbeat music on the side lawn. Couples and families had laid out blankets and picnics, and there were games being organized behind the church. There was festive bunting and streamers decorating everything, the red, white, and blue national

flag flying proudly in front of the church. Many of the attendees waved small flags. The atmosphere was happy and festive.

Nathan spied the rented pony cart tied off to the side of the building, and recognized it as belonging to the livery stable. He also recognized the lap robe on the seat as belonging to his wife. Not seeing Leona near the vehicle, he began to walk around looking for her. He scoured the grounds without success. People greeted him kindly but denied seeing his wife. He eventually wandered into the church kitchen to see if she was there, but none of the ladies preparing food had seen Leona there for over an hour.

He wondered if she'd grown tired of waiting for him and had gone back to the cabin. *If she had, why didn't she take the pony cart?* he wondered, sighing.

He didn't fancy walking all the way back yet. He had hoped for a nice meal and a cold drink before trekking back to the cabin. The church ladies always excelled in desserts, and it would be rude to sample them before lunch.

He spied his father sitting under a tree with three other men, and abruptly turned away. Milton was absorbed in the conversation and didn't notice Nathan as he passed by. What was more, Nathan was too far away to hear what the men were discussing. The sound of Will's accusation of *murderer, murderer* started repeating over and over in his head. *Could it be?* As he rounded the corner of the church building, he nearly ran straight into his brother-in-law, the last person he wanted to see.

Oh Leona, where are you? He was getting tired of butting heads with his brother-in-law and just wanted everything to be settled with Leona so that they could get back to living their lives. Today was going to be the day it was all settled if he had his way. Will was also dressed for the occasion, looking dapper in his suit and straw boater hat. He went to shoulder Nathan off to the side, looking like a man on a mission.

Nathan put out his hand to stop Will.

"I hope you're not planning to make a scene over here, Will," he used both hands to push against Will's chest. "It's a holiday after all.

You don't need to make a public scene of a private matter."

Too late he realized that Will wouldn't be stopped. There were no further words needed as Will swung on Nathan with all his might, catching him squarely in the jaw. Will emitted a grunt of pain as his fist connected with the bones of Nathan's face, yet the fire in his eyes indicated he couldn't care less about his discomfort.

Nathan flew backwards, landing on his backside on the grass, which had begun to turn golden as it dried out in the drought and summer heat. He leapt to his feet and felled Will with a running tackle, sending them both sprawling on the ground. They began grappling and pummeling one another, throwing and delivering blow after blow.

Two of the church elders came running, but were unable to break up the brawl, lest they be caught by flying fists or feet. Will smashed his fist into Nathan's chest as he rolled on top of him. Nathan bucked and pushed Will off, both men scrambling to their feet. They both heaved, trying to catch their breath.

“I have it all, Nathan! Proof that your father is responsible for the fire which burned down my house and killed my parents!” Will heaved.

“I’ve been doing a lot of digging around and visiting a lot of our neighbors since I came back. Your father was already at my house when everyone else got there to put out the fire. He tried to stop them from pouring water on the flames. These people had been afraid to speak, but now they told me how he grabbed you so you couldn’t go in and help us. He wanted the house to burn down! He’s a *murderer*!”

Nathan was still in denial. He knew his father hated the Groves but, enough to kill them?

“No! I won’t believe it!” Nathan saw red and went after Will again. Will swept his leg out from under him, and down Nathan went, the impact knocking the wind from his chest. For a moment, he couldn’t breathe, but then his lungs remembered how to work. The two men struggled and wrestled, heedless of the gathering crowd of onlookers.

Will was tricky, but Nathan was stronger and more physically fit. He could see that Will was growing weary and knew that he had the advantage, so he deflected the blows, but didn't land any more hits that would wound Will.

The buzz about the fight went through the crowd. Women and children screamed for them to stop, but suddenly a shriller scream came from another place outside of those witnessing the fight. The men ignored it, too intent on besting each other.

Nathan was blocking Will's every attempt to beat him, and eventually asserted his advantage. He twisted Will's left arm behind him, effectively pinning him to the ground. Using his weight against Will, he sat on the legs of his brother-in-law and pinned him to the ground.

Struggling to catch his breath, he eased a little of the weight off of Will's torso, so that he could do the same.

"This has to stop!" Nathan said through gritted teeth. "We're family, Will."

Will only grunted as he struggled to free himself from Nathan's grasp, but Nathan held him fast. Then they heard someone shout Leona's name, and Nathan jumped to his feet.

As Will rose, one of the elders pinned his arms and held him as the second one did the same to Nathan. They were standing immobilized, staring daggers at each other.

Nathan had a cut above his eye that was bleeding profusely, and Will's nose appeared to have been broken. His eyes were watering, and his breath came in wet gasps. He tried to staunch the bleeding with a handkerchief but to no avail.

The shout came again. They both distinctly heard Leona's name.

They also heard the words, "Fire! Over there!"

The world tilted for them both as in the distance, someone asked, "Is that the Grove house?"

Will and Nathan exchanged a quick look then twisted out of the grip of the elders, freeing themselves to move ahead. The animosity between them was instantly forgotten as this new crisis loomed. Nathan slipped, turning too sharply, and Will grabbed his arm to steady him. They both broke into a dead run out of the churchyard, cutting through the fields towards home, their altercation forgotten. Nathan's blood ran cold as they neared the turnstile at the property line of the Groves' homestead. Will, then Nathan jumped over the gate. They could already see the rising smoke.

Chapter 31

Leona heard the scuffling sound again as she exited the kitchen. She froze in her tracks when she saw who was standing in the parlor with a torch in his hand, and an evil leer on his face. She could see the reflection of the flames in his eyes, and the madness there chilled her to the bone.

Milton Carell was disheveled and wild-looking. Leona could see that he was not himself, he had been transformed into a madman.

Leona was suddenly overwhelmed by fear. She'd seen the sinister side of Milton Carell in person on more than one occasion. Will had just told her about all the evidence he had collected proving that Milton was responsible for the fire. If Leona had carried any questions or doubt in her mind before, it was all gone with one look into the wild eyes of Milton Carell. In that moment, she was certain that Will was telling the truth. *Of course: Milton was responsible for our parents' deaths, and the fire.*

He also clearly meant her harm.

Before Leona could speak, Milton grabbed ahold of her, pulling her close to him, brandishing the torch in his other hand. Leona gasped at the pain and the strength of his hand on her arm. His entire demeanor was sinister and terrifying. “What are you doing here?” Milton rasped, his voice filled with hostility. Leona’s shock gave way to fear when she realized that she was alone and at Milton Carell’s mercy. Even if she screamed with all her might, there was nobody nearby to hear her. Her mind raced, trying to figure out a way of the predicament she found herself in.

“I just came to finish what I started all those years ago,” Milton sneered.

Gesturing around the house with his torch. Bringing the flames close to Leona’s face, he laughed maniacally, and Leona felt her voice leave her. She was terrified and shrunk away from the heat and the flames. She panicked and struggled to break free of his iron hold. Milton played with her, increasing her unease as he threatened and intimidated her. Laughing at her fear, he sadistically tormented her until she sobbed.

She shook her head frantically, unable to get a word out. She struggled and twisted to get away, but Milton wasn't finished toying with her yet.

"Now, Miss Grove, let's talk about what happened here. You were not supposed to get out of this house back then. You surely won't get out of the ruins now. You're responsible for the death of my wife, and neither you, nor your family is getting away with it."

Leona's eyes were wide with terror and the implications of what Milton Carell was saying to her.

"What…" She couldn't get the question past her lips.

Milton laughed with glee, then suddenly became serious.

"What your family did to mine had to be avenged. They couldn't just steal our land, Carell land, and get away with it, don't you see? That's not your land, it's mine. Mine! I had to do it. I couldn't let them steal the well without consequences, I had to kill them."

Leona gasped, the revelation now that it was out of the lips of the man who was responsible was nearly unbearable.

"Then there was *you*! You and your brother, you just had to come back and ruin everything, Leona. Why didn't you just die here with your parents? It would have made everything so much easier. I had to watch your brother and my own son," Milton spat, "build this house again, another reminder of what was stolen by you Groves. Coming back and making everything thrive and grow, while my crops wither in the fields. It's not the drought that's causing it, it's the Groves. You, always you!" Milton was beyond reasoning, that much Leona could tell. She trailed off behind him, her feet aching with effort to keep up.

"Everywhere I turn, you Groves are there making my life hell, now trying to steal my only son away from me. It's not going to happen I tell you. Now, I have to burn it all again and it's all your fault, missy! You're not going to get out of here today. I promise you that." Milton's face was dark as death and Leona's fear turned to abject terror.

He means to kill me! she realized. The panic rose in her as she felt

the heat of the torch near her face again. She shoved Milton away from her and escaped his grasp. Taking two steps stumbling backwards she beseeched Milton, begging him to see reason.

"I didn't have anything to do with it, you know this! I was just a child; you surely must remember. Nathan and I were just children when the fire happened. Will and I never did anything to you, my parents didn't deserve to die. Please, don't do this. We're family now, I love Nathan. You don't have to do this."

Milton practically spat the words, "You *love* Nathan! I have seen how you 'love' him. No. We are going to play this game my way. Then I'm going to bring that son of mine into line. His turn will come. I'm going to rid this place of Groves, once and for all. You, first, and then your beloved brother." Milton began to advance on her, the torch held in front of him.

Leona spun around to flee out the front of the house, but as she turned to run, she was stopped short by a wall of flames in front of her.

The house! Oh God, no!

Leona was trapped. The house was going up in flames again.

For a moment she was transported to the scene of the original fire and looked around frantically for a path to escape the flames. Milton was laughing again, delighting in his mad vision of her burning up with the new construction.

“It’s getting hot in here, isn’t it Miss Grove? This is the way it has to be. Nowhere to run this time! Not like before. No brother to save you. There’s no running away from this! You know how this ends. The only way it can end.” Milton repeated as a chant, becoming more disconnected from reality.

In that moment, Leona could only hear panic shrieking in her mind. She was nearly deaf with fear, consumed by her situation and the inevitability of another fire. All she could hear was blood racing in her ears and her heart pounding. She was nearly frozen with terror.

Then, suddenly, as if from a distant whisper in the back of her

brain, she could hear her name.

Leona! Leona!

Surely this was her brain trying to keep her present, keep her from simply fainting in terror. *I must stay focused*, she tried to think.

Leona! she heard again.

This time, she realized that voice was not her own internal one. No, as if quietly from far away, far outside her brain, even outside the room or the house, she heard a voice call her name called again, a distant echo. Wait–*two* voices.

It was Nathan and Will!

Their roars and howls were able to pierce the increasing crackling of the fire. Leona was jolted back into reality hearing their voices. She ran back towards the old kitchen as she searched for a way out, but her way was blocked by Milton brandishing his torch at her. He lunged at her again, but she dodged his grasp. Milton swore and

ranted as she evaded him. Leona could scarcely take in what Milton was saying, her mind was reeling.

She had always felt the hate in Milton Carell that was directed in general to her family, and specifically at her, but had never thought he was a murderer! After Will had spoken to her on Friday, she had begun to consider the possibility.

She was relieved to know that Will and Nathan were searching for her, but couldn't form the sound, the words to call out to warn them. Her voice just would not cooperate. She prayed they would come soon. In the meantime, she didn't know how she would get out and survive this fire. Leona feared she would never get her voice back again.

Milton continued his rant, and the more he spoke, the more Leona learned about what had happened the night her parents died. *It wasn't lightning!* she processed. It was Milton who set the fire and lied about it. Then, the realization: *He killed my parents! He's bragging about it!* Will was right.

Leona's terror grew as Milton doggedly pursued her and pushed her, still ranting, closer and closer to the fire, which was now in full force on the parlor wall, spitting embers out into the open roof. The crackling began to increase in volume, the flames growing higher and hotter. A spark flew off the blaze and landed on his sleeve, but he hardly noticed, he was so caught up in his mania. He simply patted it absent-mindedly and continued to pursue Leona with his torch in hand.

Milton began to yell and laugh louder, his voice being drowned out by the crackling of the blaze, which had engulfed the entire wall of the new construction of the parlor and was spreading into the hall and stairwell. As Leona dodged his grasp again, he lost his footing and slipped, falling to his knees. Leona saw her chance and took it. Picking up her skirts, she flew past Milton as he scrambled to his feet and swiped at her as she passed, missing her by inches.

Leona headed towards the front exit, and as she ran, she let out a scream, "Nathan! Will! Help me, he means to kill us!"

Just then she had the breath knocked from her body. She flew

forward and landed with a thud about three feet from the front door. Milton had tackled her from behind. His breath was hot in her ear, his body pinning her to the floor.

“We’ll see about this now, Miss Grove. Just where do you think you’re going to go?”

At first, she couldn’t catch her breath, she felt like she was suffocating, then her lungs began to function again and she was able to find her voice.

“No! Let me up! Please!” Leona sobbed, bucking and twisting under his weight, but there was no escaping him. He had her at his mercy once again. She had a brief thought that she might die there, right where her mother did all those years ago, then her thoughts went to Nathan, her love, her husband. *Where are you?*

“Nathan!” she shouted with all her might.

Milton laughed an evil sound in her ear. “Your Nathan can’t save you now. I tried to keep him from saving you then, and this time he

will not be here in until this place has been reduced to ash. I don't care if I die, too. It would be worth it to rid the land of you Groves!" The statement rang true to the last word.

"Please! Don't do this," Leona begged. She knew Milton was past saving. He didn't care if he lived or died, only that she died. He had truly gone over the edge of madness. She'd seen only glimpses before today; she had blamed the drink, or his grief, but now she was convinced that Milton Carell was insane, a maniac.

She writhed under his weight, and he rolled off of her and stood. Before she could get her bearings, his hands were in her hair and she was being dragged back into the heat, kicking and screaming.

Chapter 32

Nathan's lungs felt ready to burst and his heart was beating out of his chest. He didn't feel any of the effects of the fight with Will, only the urgency to get to Leona. He and Will stopped short at the front porch of the house. The air was getting thick with choking smoke. Nathan realized without a doubt that everything that Will had told him about his father's role in the fire that killed his parents was true.

It was hard to take but the signs had been there all along. The way Milton ranted about the Groves, and the disdain, bordering on hatred, that he had shown to Leona and Will without excuses.

Nathan now knew that his father had done exactly just what Will had accused him of, and it appeared that he was up to more of the same, and this time, Leona was in greater peril!

"Leona!" Will called out her name, circling around to the side of the house looking for a way in to rescue his sister.

"Let's split up!"

Nathan nodded, obeying Will's command, and went left to the parlor window, which he discovered was already burning. He sprinted to the back door and met up with Will again, both men shouting Leona's name. He opened the back door, and the two men entered the newly constructed kitchen.

Nathan could hear his father ranting and laughing. His tone was sinister, and he was clearly taunting Leona. She didn't give any audible reply. Will and Nathan could see that the east wall of the house was nearly engulfed in flames; the smoke poured out the open unfinished window. It clouded their vision, and the heat became more intense as they approached.

They spotted Milton and Leona at the same time as Leona let out a blood-curdling scream, "Nathan! Will! Help me! He means to kill us!" The beseeching call ended with a strangled sob.

The horrific scene playing out in front of their eyes was the stuff of nightmares, especially for Will, who was forced to relive the same tragedy. He suddenly found himself rooted to the spot.

Nathan jumped towards his father yelling, “Papa, what are you doing? You need to stop! Let Leona go. Let’s talk about this.”

Nathan tried to reason with Milton. Just as the words left his lips, Will pushed him aside and strode over to where Milton stood, holding onto Leona.

“Look here, Milton. Let my sister go, and I’ll tell the law to go easy on you.”

The flames were beginning to lick at the ceiling and the smoke was thick, burning their eyes and throats. Nathan implored his father, but Milton snarled at Will, “Don’t touch my son, Grove. Hey! C’mon over here. You can come and burn with your sister if you love her so dearly.”

Milton let out that evil laugh that made Leona’s blood run cold. Will unleashed an angry cry as his frustration boiled over. Nathan could see he was losing control, so he stepped up to try and stop his father.

“Please Papa, you don’t want to do this. I know you feel cheated, but Will and Leona had nothing to do with what happened with the land.”

Nathan tried again to reach his father, but he had descended too far into his wicked fantasy and time was on nobody’s side.

“You stay back, son. I don’t want you to get hurt. Your mother would never forgive me. You gotta understand, they deserve to burn, they have to pay, don’t you see?” Milton was suddenly calm, laying out his twisted logic for Nathan, who was, for the first time, really understanding just how lost his father truly was in his delusion.

“No Papa, you’ve got to let Leona go. Prove you’re not a murderer. Make it right. I know you’re hurting; I’m hurting, too. Let’s put an end to this. This isn’t how we want to end it, is it? What would Mother say?” Nathan wheedled and begged his father, but he didn’t respond. Milton looked at Nathan stone-faced and unruffled.

It was as if he felt nothing at all. He calmly and simply said, “I’ll

end it soon. Don't worry, Nathan."

Then he smiled an evil leer and the look in his eyes made Nathan sick to his stomach. His wife had terror on her face, and he felt ineffective and weak. Truly for the first time in this ordeal, Nathan felt hopeless and began to despair.

Leona's sobbing broke through his words, and the look in her eyes was of terror and loss. Nathan met her gaze and his heart broke. He knew she was in danger and wasn't sure if he could save her.

Milton continued, "They have to pay. They might not have stolen the well, but they are complicit in your mother's death, son. They're the reason she's dead." He grabbed Leona by the collar of her dress, and again by the hair, and pulled her around in front of him. "You have to pay," he told Leona, who pulled back from his evil gaze, looking around frantically at Nathan.

"Do something, please. He's going to kill us!" Leona shrieked in terror.

Nathan couldn't help but cry, and he yelled to his wife, "Leona, we're coming."

Milton laughed and taunted Leona with the torch in his hand, then threw it towards where Will was advancing on him.

"That's right, Willy, you come on over here and burn with your sister. That'll suit me just fine."

Just then, they heard a sickening crack and one of the ceiling beams came crashing down behind Milton and Leona. Milton jumped forward, pulling Leona along with him. Sparks and embers flew through the air and out the window.

The entire east side of the house was now fully engulfed and the unfinished ceiling beams were catching one by one. It wouldn't be long before the dining room and kitchen would be alight. Will took a chance to move closer. Milton was starting to choke from the smoke. Will thought that if he could catch him off-guard, now that Milton had thrown the torch, he might be able to subdue Milton and get to Leona. Will signaled to Leona and caught her gaze as he moved forward. She

stopped screaming and looked intently at her brother, conveying something to him and moving her mouth soundlessly. Will nodded briskly and advanced.

Nathan had moved to the west side of the house, thinking perhaps together they could get to Leona. Will knew that Milton wasn't going down without a fight and even suspected that, in his demented state, he expected to perish in the fire he had set.

"Stay back, Nathan. You stay out of this. It's the Groves I want," Milton glared at his son.

"You've betrayed me long enough, choosing this," he shook Leona and pulled her closer to the heat and flames, "*this* woman here!"

Leona struggled with all her might, screaming as he pulled her hair, pummeling Milton with her fists and digging her heels into the wood floor, pulling away from the heat as hard as she could. She was nearly hysterical with fear.

“Come on, Will. We’re waiting for you.” Milton grimaced and then laughed to himself.

Shaking his head, he clucked his tongue, “Nathan, you just don’t understand. I have to do this. This is the only way I can pay them back for your mother. You know it’s their fault she’s gone.”

Milton was convinced of the purpose of his diabolical plot he’d been hatching since Leona and Will returned to Hunter Springs.

Will stood there for a moment as if in a trance. He’d been through this already once. The sense of having been in the same situation before was so strong that he felt lost in time. He looked over to the corner of the parlor where his father had lay dying from smoke inhalation as he’d tried to rescue their mother. He stood frozen there until Leona’s wailing and Milton’s diabolical laughter and taunting voice brought him back to himself. He had to get to Leona, but he was going to make sure that Milton Carell got what was coming to him.

All the proof of the Grove murder and arson was sitting close by at his cabin, and now, being a firsthand witness to arson and

attempted murder again, Will was certain that he would be there to see Milton Carell hang for his crimes. He wouldn't be sorry to see the man swing.

Will's gaze swiveled around to track Nathan's movements, while the heat from the fire increased, he was creeping around to the side of the room that was not on fire yet. The flames were licking across the ceiling beams, and the hallway walls were now collapsed. It wouldn't be long before everything they had been building was lost. He couldn't dwell on that now; his only thought was how to save his sister. Where Milton had tossed the torch down, some lumber and construction materials were smoldering. Will knew that he had to act quickly, or there would soon be another wall of fire to contend with. Leona beseeched Will with frantic looks and pleaded with Milton to let her go, but he was unmoved.

As the fire grew, smoke filled the air and Milton was now coughing vigorously, trying to cover his nose and mouth with his arm and hold Leona at the same time. She was still struggling, but the smoke was getting to her too, and her mental state was suffering. She kept seeing the scenes in her mind of her parents' demise, what she'd

witnessed was indelibly etched on her memory, but so horrible that she couldn't bear reliving it. So, she did what she had done nearly seven years ago. She retreated inside her silence to protect herself.

Nathan could see that the fire was becoming too dangerous to remain in the building. He had a better vantage point and had an exit plan forming in his mind. While Milton's attention was on Will, he'd found the way out of the house. He was near the window and could hear shouting that told him that their neighbors were rallying outside. He uttered a short prayer that they would all be saved, though he was certain Death was lingering nearby and would not leave without company.

Nathan sucked in a deep breath, steeling his nerves. He was almost ready to make his final move.

Chapter 33

Will had been communicating with Leona secretly while Nathan and Milton were arguing back and forth. He had stayed where he was but told Leona through American Sign Language exactly what he was planning.

Nathan caught Leona's eye and she looked pointedly at Will. Nathan looked over to Will who was using sign language to communicate with Leona with the understanding that Nathan had also been taught to communicate using this method and Milton was unable to decipher it.

Nathan signed to Will, *once you get your hands on her, there's a way out here.*

Will nodded and Leona looked back and forth between them. He repeated his instructions so that Nathan could see him.

To Leona, Will signed, *I'm going to push you out of the way. You run to Nathan. I'll take care of Milton*. The sign he made was for father, and if his hands shook Leona made no comment on the matter.

With effort, she swallowed down her grief. Nathan was losing his father to the flames today, although his mind had for long gone astray, steeped in love which had been turned to bitter despair.

Leona nodded her understanding, barely keeping her wits together. She was desperate and willing to try anything to get away and out of the burning house. She trusted her brother and knew that he and her husband would save her. She felt hopeful for the first time since entering the room and seeing Milton standing there just a mere hour ago.

Milton was looking at Will strangely. Then, he trained his gaze on his son. He knew about the sign language; he just didn't know how to read it. What was clear to him was that they were planning something. He just didn't know what it was.

The intense heat of the fire was pushing Milton and Leona forward towards the front of the house. Nathan could plainly hear that there were people outside, but he didn't understand what they might be doing out there. He wanted them to come help him and Will rescue

Leona and drown the fire, but no one came.

"What are you up to, Nathan?"

Nathan shook his head. "I don't know what you mean, Papa. Will you please stop this madness? Please, let my wife go! We need to get out of here. The whole place is going up in flames. Are you happy now?"

Milton simply smiled and deliberately nodded his head. He was enjoying the chaos and the heat. He'd been plotting this ever since he had found out that his son had married a Grove. There was no way he wasn't going to finish this to his satisfaction. All of the years of regret and anger had culminated in this moment. Milton knew that he wouldn't be finished with this plan until there were no more Groves left in Hunter Springs Canyon.

Milton felt rather proud of his plot, how he had caught up to Leona, trapped her in the half-finished building, and cut her off with flames. The terror in her eyes was like mother's milk to him. He found it delightful. Now, to have Will Grove inside the house again, Milton

saw his chance to have everything he'd ever wanted. To rid the land of the Grove family, to take back what rightfully belonged to him, to Nathan. To wipe out the Groves and restore the Carell legacy. So what about Nathan's wife!

He could find another woman, a better one, and still have children to carry on the Carell name. Milton thought about owning the well, selling the water to the townspeople and building his family's fortune back up to a respectable level. He and his son would be able to hold their heads up again, and not be poor and ashamed. That was all he ever wanted, and now it was going to come true.

Nathan could see his father was getting some kind of a sick satisfaction from his evil plan and was disgusted. The flames were getting hotter, and he knew the time had come.

He nodded at Will to make his move, and the two men sprang into action. Milton saw Will coming and shoved Leona into the flames, tackling Will as he ran in. Nathan leaped into the fray, crossing the room in two long strides to pull Leona to him but before he could get there, Milton was spreading the fire in the pile of wood where he'd

thrown the torch down.

A wall of flames suddenly separated Will and his sister, and Nathan from them both.

“Noooo!” Leona screamed and ran from one side of the room to the other to the doorway, only to be repelled by the heat and flames.

“Nathan! Will! No!” Leona had come to the end of her wits. She had tried everything to get away and found herself surrounded with no way out.

She saw Milton Carell advance toward her and she screamed again at the top of her lungs. It was as if each moment of silence from the past had found flight and issued out of her until her body vibrated with the effort. She raged and cried, then she fell to her knees in defeat.

Leona realized, finally, that Milton had won.

She was trapped once again in the flames, and now she knew

that she was going to die there, in the house where her parents had perished. Will would not be able to save her this time. She began to retreat in her mind, as the heat became more intense. The air at the lower parts of the property was clearer, as the smoke rose towards the sky.

Milton was weakening, coughing, and sputtering as the smoke had his weakened lungs in spasm. The struggle and fight had tired him, but his resolve was not diminished. He pummeled and punched Will and was surprised at how easily he was able to physically overpower the younger man. He laughed with glee at the sight of Leona on the floor surrounded by the flames. Will and Nathan were becoming more frantic by the second; Will had stopped struggling for a moment, and Milton felt quite satisfied by the scene before him. He was proud of himself. His plot had worked!

He had imagined and executed his plan so perfectly. There was no way Will would abandon his precious sister, and all Milton had to do was to grab ahold of his son and pull them both to safety, while those Grove children perished as they should have nearly seven years ago when he'd first hatched his diabolical plot. He jumped out of the

way cackling his glee as another portion of the unfinished stairway collapsed.

Leona could see Nathan on the other side of the flames.

“Get out, save yourself!” she cried.

“Leona! I’m coming. Hold on, I’ll be there to get you. I won’t leave you!” Nathan’s voice reached her just as she retreated into her mind to wait for the unimaginable to happen.

At least I had love, at least I had Nathan, Leona consoled herself. Leona was glad she at least could say she had happiness and love in her life before dying.

“I love you, Nathan,” she cried out, choking and crying, reliving the horror of her past as these flames rose from her memory and mingled with the ones she was up against now, leading her to her ultimate collapse. She thought back to watching her parents die before her eyes and was sad that Nathan would have that memory along with his father’s madness to remember this day. The Fourth of July would

always be a sad day, instead of a day of celebration as it should be.

Memories of her childhood in this home flooded her mind. She thought back to the time she and Nathan had spent together running through the orchards and fields, carefree and innocent children who already loved each other with an unending love.

She recalled the day she came back to Hunter Springs, the day John Murray was killed. Seeing Nathan again for the first time, how shocked and delighted she was to find him again. How happy he was to find her, and how he had jumped at the chance to keep her with him. The love and kindness he'd shown to her, helping her find her voice again when she thought she would have to live in silence forever. She relived those tender moments in her mind. The times they'd spent with Nathan reading to her, the sonorous tone in his voice relaxing her and making her feel safe.

She remembered how he had stood up to his father to put her first in his life. The conversations they'd had over the dining table planning the building of their home together. They'd dared to love and dream about the future, but tragedy had overtaken Leona again.

She regretted that she'd let Nathan into her orbit, so that he, too, would again be struck by tragedy. If only she'd been able to resist his sweet ways and his promises. He would not be in danger, and she would not be in so much pain at the thought of leaving him behind. She was grateful for the short time they'd had together to be happy before Milton had returned to ruin everything.

His sick and twisted soul had poisoned the very air around them. It was too late to do anything but remember, so Leona tried with all her might to hold on to the happy memories. The look of love in Nathan's brown eyes, the sound of his sweet voice calling her "wife." She thought about their marriage ceremony, and how they were both moved to tears in exchanging their vows. It was a true love Leona affirmed to herself.

Leona cherished those happy times, but sadness overtook her, and despair washed over her in a wave of regret.

She cried and wailed, not for her husband, but for herself. She was realizing that this truly was the end. She would never see her house finished, never have the children to live and grow up there. She

would never hear her beloved's voice read to her again, never hear him say her name in that special sweet way he had of cherishing her. All of their hopes and dreams were burning to cinders all around her. She could hear him, her sweet Nathan, calling her name.

"Goodbye, my love," she whispered, before everything went black.

Chapter 34

Nathan saw that Milton was struggling to keep Will subdued, and decided it was time to make his move. He was going to take his father down. He began to circle around, keeping low beneath the layer of thick smoke that was surrounding them. The crash of another beam from the stairwell stopped him and as he looked for another avenue to reach Milton, he saw five men coming up behind his father. The neighbors from the church picnic had finally reached them.

Nathan briefly wondered what had taken them so long to arrive but realized it must have been in mere minutes that all of this chaos had unfolded. Time seemed suspended as he watched the scene unfold before him.

The men laid hands on Milton who screamed and wailed his disappointment at his plans being thwarted. He fought with the men, who quickly subdued him and led him out the front of the burning building, what was left of it, anyway.

Milton became more agitated as they pulled him outside and held him there to await the arrival of Deputy Moore. They sent a boy

to fetch him by horseback. Milton's eyes were wild, and he was ranting unintelligibly.

One church elder in particular feared he was possessed by a demon and implored the deacon and preacher to pray for him. Milton spat at the men, filled with rage at his brilliant plot being interrupted. He tried in vain to convince them to release him. Explaining in his demented reasoning why they should let him murder the Grove children and restore his family's legacy. The people who witnessed this speech were shocked and appalled at the depths of depravity that Milton Carell had sunk to.

They had heard rumors of his descent into drunkenness but had not realized the extent of his illness. He truly was a madman, willing to kill his own son's wife over an imagined grudge that had been built up in his mind for years, fermenting and becoming poisonous to his soul.

Will, released from Milton's grasp, ran towards the flames, ready to jump through the wall of fire and rescue his sister. Nathan grabbed hold of his brother-in-law just in the nick of time. Will struggled and

fought with him but Nathan was the stronger man. Will was ready to risk being burned to save his sister, but Nathan wouldn't let him.

"Let me go!" Will yelled at Nathan, who was holding him with an iron grasp.

"Will, you must stay back. You can bring the evidence for my father's guilt to the judge and to the court. You can allow your parents to rest in peace!" Nathan gasped, eyes darting between Will and the wall of flames.

"If you do not let me go now, Leona will join them soon enough!" Will cried out, yet Nathan pierced him with his gaze.

"I can't lose you, too," Nathan said. "I'm going to in to save her."

The declaration was undisputed, yet Will found his lips moving in opposition. "How? Please, God, don't let her burn!"

Will cried as he fell to his knees in despair. His memories and childhood trauma were now flooding his mind and heart, making him

feel hopeless and lost. He couldn't save his parents then, and now he wasn't going to be able to save his sister either. He was devastated and broken at the thought. With one final promise to emerge alive, Nathan left a shaky Will behind, leaping amidst the blaze.

Leona lay on the floor, her form partially obscured by the flames. The heat was becoming unbearable, the only thing that kept them from perishing themselves was that the ceiling and roof had not been finished, so the smoke continued to rise towards the sky. The open air was causing the fire to burn more intensely, and they both knew that they were running out of time.

Nathan looked around frantically then felt a shock of cold hit him.

Water!

The group of neighbors and folks from the church had formed a bucket brigade, lining up from the well and were throwing buckets full of water on the fire.

“There!” Nathan pointed frantically at the spot where the flames were the lowest. Will snapped out of his despair, suddenly hopeful. He jumped over to grab the next bucket and concentrate the water where Nathan was pointing. They could still hear Nathan’s father screaming and ranting like a madman as they pulled him away from the house. It was a race against time. Each bucket of water doused the flame for only moments, and it seemed like they were only putting drops of water on the flames and not buckets.

“We need more water!” he yelled at the men. Will nodded and ran out to the line. Realizing how far the distance was from the well to the house, Nathan’s panic began to grow. He prayed it wasn’t too late to knock down the flames enough to get through. He didn’t know how they would be able to increase the amount of water to pour on the fire. He would have to let the men deal with that. His only thought now was how he was going to get through the flames to Leona.

After several minutes and a dozen or so buckets of water, Nathan could see a gap in the wall of flame. He took his chance then, telling Will, “Wet me down!”

Will obliged with the next two bucketfuls of water. The shock of the cold made Nathan sputter and shake, but it was the jolt he needed. The steam was rising from his body, he had taken on so much of the intense heat from the flames. He knew it was now or never, and he had to act, or he might fail to save his wife. The beams and walls were crumbling and the fire spreading to every wooden surface whether it was part of the building or the grass outside.

He took a running start and dove through the fire. He landed hard on his shoulder and rolled to a stop. He struggled back to his feet and ran to where his wife was lying semi-conscious on the floor. She didn't appear to be injured, beyond a couple of bruises on her arm and one on her jaw that was forming from her fall to the ground. Leona's hair was singed, and her eyebrows and lovely eyelashes had melted from the heat. Her dress was twisted around her legs, but from what Nathan could tell, she had sustained no burns to her clothes or body.

He was so relieved he nearly cried.

Nathan crouched down and took Leona in his arms, saying her

name over and over again. Her eyelids fluttered open at the sound of his voice. She appeared confused, her eyes not focusing on anything in spite of being open. She came to, for just a second and registered his face, not sure if he was a dream or a memory.

"Nathan?"

He smiled through tears saying, "I'm here, Leona, please, you have to be all right."

Leona's lips curled in a small smile, and she slipped away again. Her body went limp in his arms.

Just then, Nathan heard Will shout, "Nathan, are you all right? Leona?"

There was panic in his voice. Nathan looked up and saw that the break in the wall of flames was closed and they were once again surrounded by fire. The intense heat was hurting his eyes and throat. Their way out was blocked!

“Leona, darling, stay with me! I’m going to get us out of here,” Nathan said with a confidence he really wasn’t feeling.

Panic began to rise in him, and he stood up and turned around in a circle to see if there was another avenue to safety. He heard and felt the hiss of steam as the men continued to throw water on the flames. He bent down to pick up Leona’s limp form from the floor. He stood with her in his arms and made a decision.

He would throw her body through the wall of flames if he had to, Will would get her to safety.

He held his wife tightly to him and kissed her on her cheek. Leona opened her eyes briefly and Nathan saw that she was trying to speak.

She made a sound that could have been “I love you” before drifting into unconsciousness again.

Nathan said a prayer for their safety and, spying a pile of boards and a rock lying there, had an idea. He ran at the wall of flames with

Leona in his arms, jumped and pushed himself off of that rock and catapulted himself through the flames, falling hard with Leona still tightly in his arms. He managed to protect her from his weight landing on her, but he wasn't so lucky. He hit the ground and the whoosh of the air leaving his lungs felt like a punch in the stomach. He thought he felt something pop in his knee as he landed.

He lay still for a few moments, not daring to move, feeling his body and joints for anything that might be broken. His breath was gone; he couldn't have stood up had he tried. It took longer than he expected to be able to inflate his lungs fully and breathe again. When he inhaled, the feeling of being choked up overcame him. He realized he'd inhaled the searing heat and it had burned his throat.

The people shouted and applauded as Nathan sat up, still not wanting to release Leona from his grasp. He had done it! Leona was saved. As Nathan struggled to get his breath back, he wept with relief.

"Leona?" He bent over her, but there was no response. "We're safe, darling, we're getting out of here," he told his wife, but though her eyelids fluttered at the sound of his voice, she did not regain

consciousness.

Will ran over to where they were, pushing his way through the onlookers that had gathered around them. He only had eyes for his sister.

“Is she all right?” he asked Nathan. Nathan shrugged, and sighed deeply, coughing to rid his lungs of the smoke.

“I hope so, Will. Let’s get her out of here. Be careful,” he told the man next to him.

Together, the man and Will lifted Leona up and carried her out onto the front lawn just as another unfinished roof section collapsed almost on top of them. Nathan struggled to his feet, taking a last look around.

Poor Will. His house is again a ruin. All that work and planning we did went up in smoke.

The thought of what this meant and who was responsible, was

torturous…

Chapter 35

The bucket brigade was still valiantly working to put the fire out and were finally making some headway. Other neighbors and more of the churchgoers from the picnic had arrived and brought buckets and water vessels to fill and pour out on the fire.

Nathan hurried out of the house and down the porch, his steps betraying his limp which he knew was attributed to his sore knee. Yet, he reached the spot where Leona lay on her back on the dry grass. Some kind neighbor had folded a shawl up to place beneath her head and had arranged her singed skirts about her ankles for modesty. One of the women had wet the corner of her shawl and was wiping Leona's brow and trying to soothe her. Another was rubbing Leona's hands, chafing them briskly to try to bring her back to consciousness.

The second woman called to her companion for smelling salts, and Nathan could see the man running towards the closest home to try and obtain them. Realizing it was his own home, he tried to call the man back, for he would find nobody inside to guide him. He finally caught the young man's attention and told him to go ahead, making sure to highlight where he could find the medical supplies, not

certain if there were actually any smelling salts among them. The man nodded and took off across the road up toward the Carells' cabin.

Embers from the inside of the burning building had been cast far and wide around the outside of the building and there were scorch marks all over what used to be the lawn. An older boy with a shovel had been assigned to walk around and put out any fires he saw. He was working on one not far from where Leona lay, still unconscious. Nathan got to her side to find that she was breathing more normally now.

Exhaling a sigh of relief that turned into a coughing fit, he excused the young woman at her side who had been helping her and sat down on the grass next to his wife. He took Leona's hand, and patted her cheek.

"Leona, can you hear me? It's me, Nathan. Will is here, too. Won't you wake up now?"

Nathan pleaded with his love to awaken, but she was still unresponsive, lost to the world and Nathan could only hope her mind

was not still trapped amidst flames…

* * *

Leona heard the sound of water and found herself on the banks of Hunter Springs Creek.

She looked up to see Nathan with his fishing pole, seated on a rock further downstream. It was a hot summer day, and the water was cool and fast-moving. The reeds and grass on the shore waved in the afternoon breeze. Nathan was playing with the bobber, and she could see the tip of the pole rise and fall as he tempted the fish to rise to the bait. The sun sparkled on the water, and she was attracted to the shiny stones just at the water's edge.

"You'd better not fall in, I'll tell your mother on you!" Nathan teased, coming up behind her. He was still a scrawny youth, just barely out of short pants, peach fuzz of a mustache just barely visible on his upper lip. She looked into his brown eyes that sparkled with mischief. Momentarily confused, she turned too quickly.

Where am I?

Leona was so startled that her foot slipped on a wet rock, and she fell sideways, her foot slid down the bank towards the water, and she nearly toppled. Nathan quickly reached out to stop her fall and they both laughed as he pulled her back from the brink. They landed in a heap at the edge of the water, roaring with laughter until tears streamed down their faces.

“That was a close shave!” Leona admitted. Looking at Nathan’s satisfied face, she knew then that Nathan was her hero and protector in life, and always would be. If only she could tell him how she felt. She blinked the tears back, and the scenery turned liquid.

She found herself walking with Nathan in the fields below the Carell cabin. They held hands as they navigated the row crops, Nathan intently checking everything from the height of the plants to the moisture content of the soil as they strolled along. He held her hand, squeezing it absent-mindedly as they walked, talking seriously about their new home construction and plans for the garden.

He rambled on at length until they came to the edge of the property line, then he stopped and turned towards her.

Taking her in his arms he embraced her affectionately, whispering in her ear, “We’re going to make a home here, Leona. Don’t worry, everything will turn out just as it’s meant to be.”

Nathan smiled down on her and placed a loving kiss on her forehead. He turned again and began to walk back towards the road that led to their home, his arm around Leona’s waist, watching for rodent holes and rocks, chatting happily about his plans for their home.

Leona had never felt so safe and cared for. She turned to speak to him, but her voice failed, as it had so many times in the past. All she wished to do was to tell Nathan how much she loved him and what being with him meant to her, but the words wouldn’t come. Leona cleared her throat, willing the sound to come forth, but the best she could elicit was a choking gasp.

Her throat burned and that gasp turned into a fit of coughing, as Nathan's concerned voice spoke her name, "Leona!"

Leona felt like she was rising from under deep water. She felt a pull to the surface as Nathan's pleading voice reached her where she had escaped into her memories. She reached out her hand and felt him take hold of her. She would know her husband's touch anywhere. She tried to speak but was overcome by another coughing fit. Nathan's strong arms helped her to sit upright as her eyes fluttered open to see his worried, soot-smudged face looming over her.

"Leona! It's all right, my darling, you're safe. I'm here." He spoke with a confidence that did not show on his face. All she could see in his brown eyes was fear.

He loves me, she thought to herself, knowing it had truly always been so, but had taken this crisis for her to wipe away any doubt she had been harboring.

Nathan's tears spilled over as Leona came back to consciousness; he pulled her to him in a tight embrace, practically sobbing his relief

and calling her his darling over and over again.

He released her so that he could look into her eyes. “You sure gave us a scare! Leona, you’re safe now. Everything will be all right, I promise. Will is here, and we’re going to be all right. Leona?” Nathan’s voice was again questioning.

He didn’t like the way her eyes were unfocused and certainly didn’t like the sound of that cough tearing through her body. It sounded raspy and painful. He could tell that she was having trouble getting her breath.

“Water! Please, someone bring some water!” Nathan called out urgently.

A young woman heard him and ran to take the dipper from the well and bring it to where Leona was choking and sputtering. It took her a few moments but after several sips of water, the lung spasms began to ease, and she was able to take a few intermittent breaths before they began again.

“Easy, sweetheart, take slow breaths,” Nathan soothed her with his voice.

The fire was still burning hot, and the smoke was not dissipating; it still poured through the unfinished holes in the building, and beams continued to crack and crash. It wouldn’t be long now until there would be nothing left to burn. Embers continued to be caught on the updrafts of warm air and the boy with the shovel was working quickly to extinguish them as soon as they landed on the summer’s dry grasses.

A second boy with two buckets of water had joined him and was helping to put out the smoldering hot spots wherever they saw smoke began to rise up from the ground. The heat was so intense that Nathan felt an urgency to move Leona farther away from the blaze.

He couldn’t see where Will had gone but knew that he was safely out of reach of the flames.

Leona was shaking her head, still coughing and trying to focus her blurred vision. The smoke was thick, and over her shoulder she

could see the line of helpers putting water on the fire. Then, as she looked back at Nathan and attempted to speak, Nathan saw her eyes widen in terror, thinking the flames were again surrounding her. He reached out his hand to stroke her hair and she reared back violently. She struggled to scoot back away from him trying to speak and couldn't make a sound.

All Nathan saw was the fear in her face and the "O" of her mouth as she tried to scream, realizing that the fire was not simply encroaching on them across the dry grass but had reached them where they sat. Nathan stared at the flames and then Leona, realizing a moment too late that his own hair and clothes were on fire!

Chapter 36

Leona finally found her voice and screamed Nathan's name in the same instant that he felt the increased heat and the burning on his back. She saw the flames, reacting with abject panic. Her memories of her parents' agony came back afresh. Only this time, it was her husband who was engulfed in flames. It was more than her fragile emotions could bear.

"No! Nathan!" Leona scooted backwards sobbing and screaming unintelligibly.

The two townswomen were unable to calm her. She struggled as they held her back, trying to get to her feet, finally giving up and collapsing into a heap of sobbing grief and sorrow, just as her brother Will flew across her field of view as nothing more than a blur and tackled Nathan full force.

The impact knocked Nathan sideways, the collision eliciting a pained grunt. The two men rolled on the grass, tumbling over and over. For a moment, Nathan thought that Will was attacking him again. He was caught off-guard and immediately attempted to defend

himself. His first instinct was to get Will to let go of him.

He bucked and squirmed, yelling at Will, “Get off me!” trying to fend off his brother-in-law’s attempt to subdue him.

Only when he felt strong hands all over his burning flesh did he realize what was actually happening. They were not fighting this time. Instead, Will had begun using his own hands and body to cut off the air and thus put out the flames that had ignited on Nathan’s body and head.

They were both yelling: Nathan in pain and surprise, and Will, for Nathan to just be still and let him put the fire out.

Finally, Nathan had no choice but to relent. Suppressing the basic instinct to fight back, he obeyed Will’s hoarse instruction and lay still while the other man pummeled and patted him. It took several minutes of Will contending with the flames to have Nathan’s clothes and the grass around him completely extinguished.

They eventually parted, sitting up, heaving, and trying to catch

their breath.

“I guess I should thank you for taking me down this time!” Nathan joked, coughing and wincing from pain.

It felt like Will might have bruised a couple of ribs in that side tackle. Will smiled and shook his head.

“I didn’t know what else to do. Not sure why you’re so hardheaded! If you had just laid there, I would have been able to beat the flames out quicker.”

Nathan shook his head, unable to not raise an eyebrow in fake irritation.

“How was I supposed to know you were helping me? The last time we met it was a different story!” The two men sat quietly for a moment before clambering to their feet.

They embraced like brothers then, the animosity of earlier in the day forgotten.

“Thank you, for saving my sister,” Will said, patting Nathan on the shoulder. “It doesn’t look like you’ve been burned too badly. You’re going to need a new vest and shirt, though.”

Will took his index finger and poked it through the holes in Nathan’s vest. “I don’t know about your hair, though. You might have to shave it off and start over.” The two men chuckled as Will’s hand now ghosted over burned strands of hair.

“Do you think Leona would like me bald?” Nathan asked, yet the answer came before he could process the fact the fire had nearly cost him his life, let alone his hair.

“She may have no choice. Wait ‘til you see yourself.” Nathan cringed at the thought of shaving his head, but the heat of the burn on his back and left shoulder blade took his attention away from that thought.

“I guess I got lucky with just some singed hair and slight burns,” Nathan admitted, turning away from Will. They were suddenly doused

with water, icy cold well water that made them both yell and gasp in shock. They let out a collective screech and looked around for who was to blame for dousing them, ready to retaliate. It was the minister who stood there with the empty bucket in his hands looking stern. Will and Nathan knew they had no choice but to thank him and laugh about it.

"It looks like you fine young men have come to an understanding after all. I'm very happy to know this. I wanted to throw a bucket of water on you two earlier when you were tussling at the church. Anger is a sin, you know, but I can see the good Lord has given you a good reason to reconcile and to cool off!" He chuckled at his own clever words while Nathan and Will nodded contritely.

As the minister turned to see how Leona was faring, they looked at each other in disbelief and were overcome with laughter again.

"Does this mean we've been baptized?" Will joked.

"I can't believe we were ready to do deadly harm to each other not an hour ago," Nathan said. "I'm sorry I doubted you, Will. I should

have known…"

He suddenly got quiet and his face was grim. Nathan's heart was full, he had to tell his friend and brother how he felt. He wasn't sure how to go about it, so he just spoke his mind.

"Will, I am so sorry for all the pain my father has caused you and Leona. I don't know what to say, except that I am so, so, sorry that I didn't know what was really going on. The signs were all there! I should have seen it. I should have known, and he would never have put you in this position again." Nathan gestured at the ruins of the house behind them. He was grieving for all Leona and Will had suffered. "He's never going to hurt anyone again, ever." Nathan said resolutely.

Will became suddenly serious. Looking down at the ground, scuffing the toe of his boot in the dirt, he took a couple of deep breaths to quell his emotions before he spoke.

"Nathan, you are not your father. You are not responsible, and I was wrong to try to hold you accountable for his crimes. You were

just a kid back when Milton set the fire, just like we were. We were just children. It's normal that you didn't want to believe the worst of your own father. It's hard to believe that anyone could be so hateful and malicious. I don't even really blame Milton."

This had Nathan blinking hastily.

"Grief is love with no place to run. That is what Leona said once. Your father may have been wrong, and I want him to pay dearly for his crimes… But… He did love your mother more than he loved life itself. Her loss shattered him, and he needed someone other than himself to blame." Will paused at that, taking a look at his brother-in-law, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"Your father's mind was poisoned by his own father, and he had to hear all about the 'feud' between the families his entire life. So, when he needed someone to blame, we were the perfect target. It's high time we put an end to all of this. You're not going to be an orphan, even if Milton hangs. You're part of my family now. I know you love my sister, and you would never do anything to hurt her." The admission tasted sweet amidst all the bitterness wallowing in Will's

mouth.

“I will be honest: I did not like you at first. In fact, I still find you a bit strange…” A low chuckle escaped Will’s lips then and Nathan’s eyes watered. “But I see you want justice to be served for your father’s crimes. And you should not be condemned along with him. Nor will you be left alone, like we were. I swore that I would never let anyone find themselves in such a dire predicament Nathan, and I have no intention of breaking my vow.” The hand around Nathan’s shoulder tightened.

“You have us. We’ll work everything out. We’ll build again.” Will’s voice broke, considering all they had lost. He extended his other hand to Nathan, who took it warmly. They had cleared the air.

Will, for his part, had seen how hard Nathan had fought to save Leona, and worked to help them to take Milton down. He had no doubt in his mind that Nathan had no prior knowledge of Milton’s arsonist history, nor the plan he had to burn the partially re-constructed Grove home and harm Leona. After they’d fought at the church, he’d not been so sure, but as soon as Nathan knew that Leona

was in danger, he put all other thoughts aside, and concentrated all of his efforts on saving Leona. Will was convinced now that Nathan was genuine in his love for his wife and her family.

Nathan finally breathed a sigh of relief mixed with sadness. How he wished he could go back in time to stop his father before he could set the fire and terrorize his sweet Leona. She didn't deserve that! He was happy and relieved that she was safe but blamed himself that he had even allowed this second tragedy to take place. Will had worked so hard to rebuild his family's legacy with the house and the farm, only to see it crumble to ashes once again.

Poor Leona! What I put her through. I wouldn't blame her if she never spoke to me after today. What a fool I've been. Again! he chided himself with shame and guilt, threatening to overwhelm him.

He darted his eyes over to where Leona was sitting on the ground, being tended to by two ladies from the church. She didn't meet his gaze. He felt sorrier than ever that he hadn't known to stop his father before he'd caused any more pain to the woman he loved.

I didn't even believe he was capable of doing such terrible things. How could I have been so wrong? he asked himself but had no real answer at the ready.

Just as before, here was Nathan regretting his actions and having to make things right with Leona, yet again. He prayed he would be able to do it. That she still wanted to be with him, and that she, above all, could forgive him. One last time, he inwardly vowed. She would never be put into a position where she was wronged, and he would have to make amends ever again. After this terrible incident was behind him, and Milton Carell paid for his crimes, Nathan knew he would dedicate every day to making Leona feel safe and happy for the rest of their lives.

Chapter 37

Leona had sufficiently calmed herself and finally, mostly, caught her breath. She was weak, her eyes burned from the now dissipating smoke, and her throat felt scratched raw from screaming. She was conscious and alert and with the help of the kind women at her side, she was able to get to her feet. She felt a little unsteady at first, but as she stood and felt the clearing air in her lungs, her coughing subsided, and she was able to dismiss the two church ladies with an embrace and thanks.

"Are you certain you're all right?" the younger woman asked her. "I think we should take you down to the church and feed you."

Leona smiled. Church ladies always thought that good food was the cure for everything, and Leona wasn't at all sure they weren't right.

"I just live right across the road," Leona choked.

Just then, she witnessed the "baptism" of her two favorite men, and her countenance changed entirely. Energized, she practically ran

to where Will and Nathan were standing and threw her arms around her brother tightly. Will's face softened, and he winced a little. Nathan had gotten in a few good punches in their earlier altercation. He knew that he was going to hurt tomorrow. His nose had stopped bleeding, but it was sore as heck.

He forgot about that for a moment as he embraced his sister, saying, "It's all over, finally, sis," he told Leona. "It's all going to be fine."

Leona's eyes filled with tears as she took in the scene of the Grove house, once again a smoldering ruin.

"Oh, Will! All your hard work!" Leona let a small sob escape her lips.

"Shhh. Don't. We're going to rebuild. It's a big loss, but that just means you'll have to put up with me hanging around with you and Nathan for a while longer."

Will smiled and looked over at his brother-in-law who only had

eyes for Leona. He'd observed the exchange between brother and sister. It was fine with him; he would patiently wait for his turn.

At the mention of Nathan's name, Leona's head came up and all of her attention was on her husband. He smiled at her, that slow, sweet smile that she'd grown to love. She practically flew into his arms, causing him to take a few off-balance steps backwards, and emit a small grunt of pain.

"Oh no! Did I hurt you?" Leona went to pull away, but Nathan was having none of that. His arms encircled her even tighter. He never wanted to release her ever again.

He laughed through his discomfort. "Not you my sweet, but your brother bowled me over pretty hard, not to mention trying to beat me to a pulp over at the church earlier. I have to admit, I did start that fight. Oh, darling, it was all so stupid!" Before he could say more, Leona's arms were around his neck, and she was kissing him in front of the minister and everybody.

Some people politely looked away, but a few onlookers

applauded what they saw as a happy ending for the young couple. Leona pulled away and blushed furiously, looking down at the ground, embarrassed by her bold display in public.

What a spectacle we are making! she thought to herself. Then she raised her head defiantly, this was her husband after all. She reckoned she was allowed to kiss him in public, especially in light of all they had just been through, so she changed her mind. She stepped back into the circle of Nathan's arms, kissing him sweetly on the mouth. Teasing and passionate, her kiss provoked Nathan in a way he didn't expect.

Then she pulled away, looked at him tenderly in the eye and put her mouth close to his ear to speak her heart quietly out of the range of the others nearby.

"I love you, Nathan Carell. I think I always have. You have saved me so many times in so many ways, how could I ever blame you for anything? Let's go home soon, shall we?"

Nathan tightened his arms around his wife's waist and replied,

“You’ve saved me too, Leona. From way back when my mama died, when my papa has been so unhappy and acted somewhat mean to me. You always took the time to make me smile. I knew I loved you even then, but my childish heart couldn’t put a name to what I felt about you. I only knew I wanted to be with you all the time.” Nathan paused, overcome with feeling.

“I only wish I had known what my father was planning, I could have stopped him and saved you all that night. We wouldn’t have had to go through everything today if only I…” Leona put up her hand to stop his mouth.

“Shhh. There’s no sense in doing this, Nathan. It’s all got to be put away and left behind us in the past. We can’t keep going back. There’s only a way forward for us now, and it’s together. You, me, Will, our family. Your father is ill, Nathan. I don’t blame you, I know it wasn’t anything you did.”

Nathan nodded. “When did you become so wise?” he asked her, sweetly.

“When I found my Nathan again,” she replied with a smile.

That smile was all that Nathan needed to know. He was completely happy.

He kissed Leona that time, unashamedly and boldly. Let the whole town watch him kiss his wife. He didn’t care. Leona was in his arms again and all was right in his world. They broke their embrace and tried to catch their breath and slow their racing hearts.

“I would ask you to marry me, Leona,” Nathan began. Leona opened her mouth to respond, and Nathan stopped her lips with another kiss. Sweeter and softer, full of promise. “We’ve already had the wedding. Let’s get on with the marriage, shall we?”

“Hey, can you find a place for your favorite brother-in-law to bunk in the cabin?” Will interjected, chuckling, aware he was interrupting the tender moment. Nathan looked at Will with a knowing expression on his face, shaking his head.

“Go back to the church, Will, and come back after supper,”

Nathan winked at Will, who got his meaning completely.

“Hey! That’s my sister!” he retorted with mock ferocity. It was Nathan’s turn to chuckle when Leona put her two cents in.

“I guess you can stay with us, but don’t come knocking too early. My husband and I plan to be otherwise engaged,” she said to Will in a stage whisper.

“Yes!” Nathan agreed. “Otherwise engaged.”

All three began to laugh. Will chuckled and shook his head, went to take one last look at smoldering ruins of his house, then headed back to the church.

The deputy arrived just then with the wagon used to transport prisoners. Will changed course to intercept him, filling him in on the happenings, and showing him where he could find Milton Carell to arrest him and take him to jail. Will directed Deputy Moore around the side of his small cabin, so that they could discreetly take Milton into custody out of respect for Nathan and Leona.

He had no care for himself, this was part of his job, and he got a particular satisfaction out of knowing that this prisoner was likely never going to see the light of day again for what he had done nearly seven years ago and had tried to accomplish that very day in burning down his family home. *I don't care if he rots in jail or swings at the end of a rope,* Will decided. *He's never going to hurt my family again.*

Milton Carell went meekly with Deputy Moore and climbed into the wagon bed without incident. Deputy Moore secured him with a shackle around his leg that was bolted to the bed of the wagon.

The deputy warned him sternly, "Don't try anything Milton, you're not going anywhere but to my jailhouse. Try to bail out of my wagon and I'll take that very personally."

Milton nodded his agreement, saying nothing.

"Good. Now that we're clear, you sit tight, and I'll be right back."

He then walked over to where Leona and Nathan were standing

with their arms around each other's waists.

"Mr. and Mrs. Carell, I'll need you two to come down to the station tomorrow or Tuesday to give your statements, if you would be so kind."

Nathan nodded his hand, agreeing, and Deputy Moore tipped his hat to Leona and walked away. Both Carells had a moment of silent reflection, then sighed a collective sigh of relief that the ordeal was now officially over.

Leona looked up lovingly into Nathan's eyes and he smiled and drew her into his arms again. She buried her face in his singed shirt that still smelt of smoke and rested her forehead against his strong chest. She knew it wouldn't be long now before they would begin building not only their home, and that their loving relationship and eventual family plan was back on track again.

Leona was happy.

Her tears of merit were the first drops of rain on a barren land

which was meant to bloom once more.

Epilogue

It was a blustery day in October when Nathan and Leona found themselves in Hunter Springs on a difficult errand. They had arrived to see Milton Carell at the jail, prior to him being moved to the penitentiary in Yuma the following week. He had received a fifty-year sentence for the crimes of arson, murder, and attempted murder, which, at his advanced age meant that he would never be released from prison.

The young couple had news to share, and though they both knew it would be difficult to see Milton again, they wanted him to know that he was going to be a grandfather, and that the Carell legacy would continue. Nathan knew that it would mean a lot to Milton to have that information with him whilst incarcerated. He was also more than a little bit curious as to why his father wanted to see him, aside from simply saying farewell.

Nathan was surprised when Leona wanted to go too. He had not asked her, but she expressed the desire to see Milton Carell face-to-face.

“I don’t hate your father,” she told him. “I cannot, nor will I ever forgive him, for he took away my parents. Without him, however, I wouldn’t have you, so I am grateful to him for that alone.” Nathan put his arm around his wife’s waist.

“You’re a good woman, Leona Carell,” he said with admiration. “Our child is very lucky to have you as his mother.”

Leona smiled and challenged Nathan, “His mother? What if it’s a her?” she retorted playfully and Nathan’s heart swelled with love.

Nathan chuckled. “Then I’m the lucky one.”

Leona took Nathan’s hand and squeezed it reassuringly.

“Are you ready to go in?” Nathan nodded.

“Do you need more time? We can do this another day.” He wasn’t sure if this was meant for Leona or himself. Leona shook her head.

“He’ll be leaving soon enough,” Leona said softly, waiving her consent, urging Nathan forward. Together they entered the office and greeted the new sheriff.

Sheriff Tate had been recruited out of New Mexico. New to Arizona, he’d only begun his new position as Hunter Springs Sheriff about thirty days prior. He greeted Nathan and Leona politely, and led them through the doorway that separated the office from the jailhouse.

Milton Carell stood up as they approached.

“Your son and his missus to see you, Carell,” Tate announced. “Since I don’t have anything else going on, you folks can take as long as you like. Old Milt here is going away for a long time, you may as well say all your goodbyes now.”

Nathan nodded, noting the impact of the sheriff’s words on his father.

Nathan had no illusions of any kind of miscarriage of justice. He and Leona both, along with Leona's dear friend Susan Murray, had sat through Milton's trial. Will prosecuted him on behalf of the State of Arizona, and won the case easily due to the many eyewitnesses who had been at the church picnic that day. The statute of limitations had not yet run out on the original arson fire, so the evidence in that case was also brought to bear and added ten years to the arson sentence. Adding to that the murder and attempted murder charges, Milton was lucky that he wasn't sentenced to hang.

Milton greeted them politely. "It's good to see you, Nathan. Leona. Thank you for coming. It looks like I'll be heading to Yuma to serve the rest of my time, and I wanted to see you face-to-face before I leave."

"Hello, Papa." Nathan pulled a chair over for his wife and she sat down, not meeting Milton's eyes. It took her a moment to find her voice.

"Hello Mr. Carell," she said, attempting to find a balance in her tone. Nathan sat down next to Leona and waited for his father to

continue speaking.

“I want to say something to you before I go. I think it’s better to do it this way than to send it in a letter. I’m deeply ashamed of myself and I want to apologize to you first, Leona. I was so lost in my anger and grief that I couldn’t see anything but hatred and vengeance. If I had been in my right mind, I never would have harmed your parents or your home, nor tried to harm you.

“For the first part of my time here in jail, I blamed the drink, but now I know better. I don’t expect that you’ll forgive me, but I want you to know that I am truly sorry. I know I’ll be judged in the hereafter, and I’m ready for that.”

Nathan and Leona had been respectfully silent while Milton was speaking. When Nathan saw the tears rolling down his wife’s face, he reached over and took her hand.

“Papa, I know you were angry and filled with grief, but that doesn’t come close to excusing what you did. I watched you terrorize my wife, and I will never be able to forgive you for that!”

“I don’t hate you, Milton,” Leona stated quietly. “I cannot forgive you, but I do have compassion to understand what you went through and the circumstances that led to your… breakdown.”

Leona had a hard time getting the words out.

“We came here today to say goodbye to you, and I feel that we probably won’t see you again. I wanted to face you to show myself that I will not let fear rule my life. I’ve been running, scared and voiceless for far too long.” The words fell heavily on Milton’s already hunched shoulders.

Leona closed her eyes, dwelling in the silence and in Nathan’s touch on her hand.

“There’s one other reason we came. I’ll let Nathan tell you,” she continued.

“Yes, Papa. We came to say goodbye and also to tell you that we’re expecting a child. If it’s a girl, we’re going to name her Lillian,

after Mama. I wanted you to know before you went away. The Carell family is not going to disappear. That's all I have to say about it," Nathan concluded.

With that, Nathan and Leona left Milton Carell in his jail cell and bid farewell to Sheriff Tate. That task behind them, they went home to make arrangements for a small party the following week.

They never heard Milton's joyous sobs, filled with belated regret, and the sheriff took the secret to his grave.

* * *

The yard was filled with the sounds of laughing children and friends gathering on the occasion of Leona's birthday. Will and Susan Murray were there. They'd been spending a great deal of time together in recent months. Leona had long observed that there was an attraction between them and after the traumatic events of the past July, they had begun courting officially. Nathan and Leona heartily approved of the match and Will had never appeared so happy.

Several of the church ladies and their families who had helped

during the fire had also become friends with the Carells and were attending the party.

One young family in particular, the Ryans, had become frequent visitors to Hunter Springs Canyon. The husband, Adam, and Nathan had begun working together on some of the pressing issues facing the Carell farm, and in addition, Adam often worked for Will on his farm, so the families had ample opportunities to be together.

As they all sat down around the big table out on the lawn to partake of the feast, Nathan and Leona brought out bottles of wine, homemade beer, and lemonade for their guests. Nathan stood and held up his hand.

“I want to thank you all for coming today to celebrate my sweet wife’s birthday. We’re grateful to have you with us. I have another small announcement. Early next year, there will be another birthday for us to celebrate. Leona is expecting! Please, raise a glass. A toast to you, my darling! Happy birthday! To Leona!”

“To Leona!” the party echoed Nathan’s sentiment. There were

congratulations all around, and as the party progressed, there were many pats on the back for Nathan. Leona was tended to by the ladies who did not let her lift a finger after her delicate condition was revealed.

Will, who already knew the Carells' secret, smiled in satisfaction. Turning to Susan, he asked her, "Would you take a walk with me after we finish with dessert? I want to show you what we're working on across the road."

Susan nodded and smiled. She would go anywhere with the handsome Will Grove. She was completely smitten and wasn't afraid to let him know it.

The moment she had laid eyes on him, she knew he was the one. The animosity between them had been resolved when Susan learned that all the sneaking and secrecy Will had exhibited was all in the quest to dig up evidence about Milton Carell. Once the trial was over, Will asked Susan if he might court her. They'd rarely been apart since.

After the cake and coffee, Will and Susan slipped away across the

road to his property. Will took Susan's hand as they walked up the garden path towards the house. The new construction had already begun, and there was little trace of the tragedy of the Fourth of July remaining, save a few piles of charred lumber. The new walls had already been raised and the trusses for the roof were laid out on the ground, nearly ready to be hoisted up to the top of the building.

Will and Susan walked across the broad porch and in through the doorway of the new house. Will chatted to her about what they'd been working on that day, and what was planned for the following week. His work at the law office kept him busy, so he had trusted the same crew as before to keep the build on pace for his goal.

Will pulled a chair from over by the wall.

"Have a seat here," he instructed her.

Susan was puzzled, but sat down, looking expectantly at Will.

"I want to give you something," Will explained. "Actually, two things." He reached into his pocket and handed Susan a key. "This key

fits the lock on this door." Will indicated the front door of the house.

"Will?" Susan's eyes grew wide. She was glad he had bid her to sit down, because she suddenly felt weak at the knees.

"I want you to be the lady of this house, Susan. The construction is on pace to be completed in time for us to move in after we marry."

Will then reached into his vest and presented her with a gold ring with a solitaire diamond in it.

"Will you do me the honor of being my wife?" Before the words were out of his mouth, Susan leapt to her feet and threw her arms around Will.

"Yes!" Susan dissolved into tears of joy as Will slipped the ring on her finger. The happy couple returned to the party as the guests were taking their leave. Not wanting to overshadow Nathan and Leona's announcement, they didn't say anything to the party guests.

Susan quietly told Leona, who squealed and hugged her friend.

Nathan smiled, congratulating them both, and looked around at all the happy faces in his world. He was convinced in that moment, that while there may be bad things that happen, the good seemed to always outweigh it.

From where they started, to where they were now, so many things had happened. Yet, here they all were, smiling and happy, expectant and hopeful.

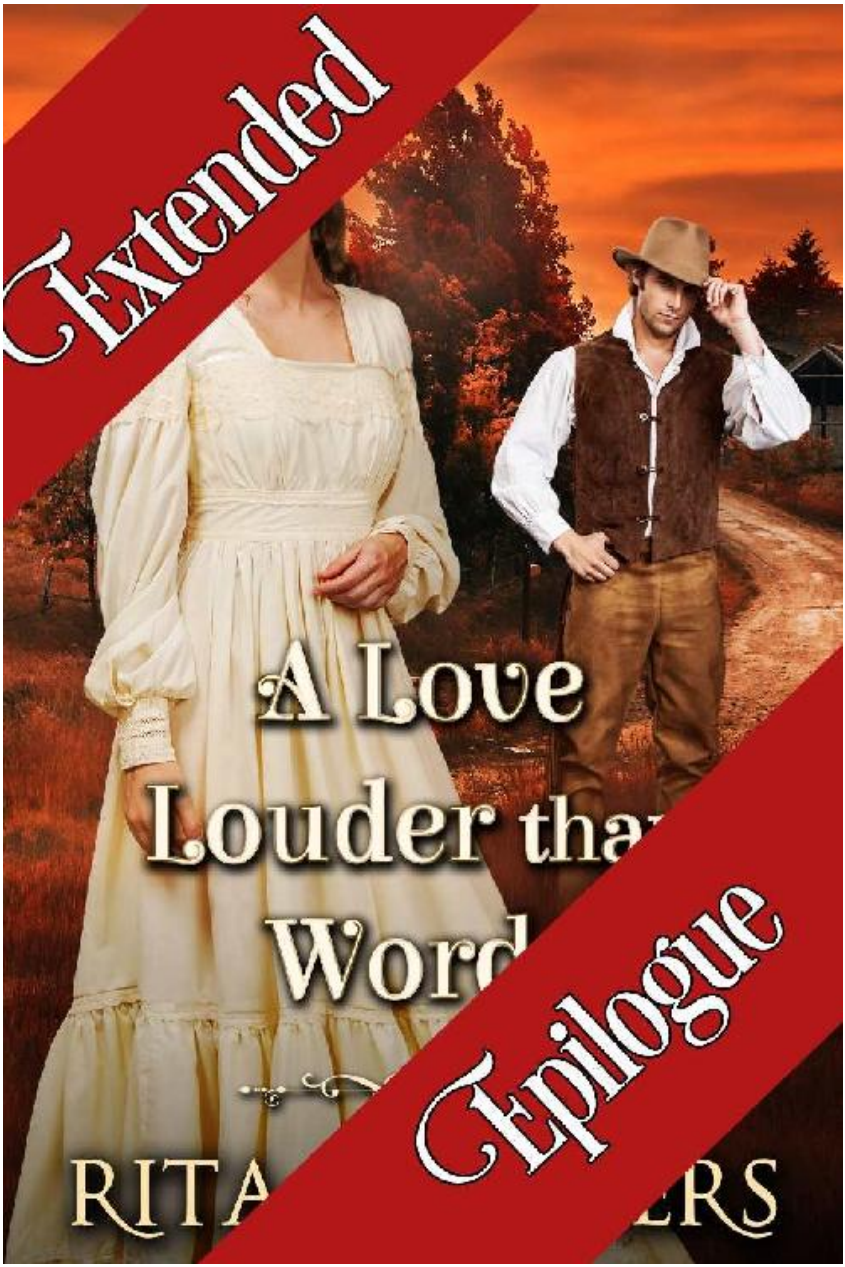
What more could a man ask for?

Extended Epilogue

*I am so happy you finished reading **"A Love Louder than Words"** till the end!*

Are you aching to know what happens to our lovely couple?

*Click on the picture or on the link below to connect to a more personal level and as a **BONUS**, I will send you the Extended Epilogue of his book!*



Or, click HERE to get it!

If you liked this book, it would be a great help and honor if you were to leave a Review about it on my Amazon Page!

A Love Beyond the Fields of Memory Preview

Prologue

To most, the ticking of a grandfather clock is a beautiful sound. Representing the passage of time is a wonderful chore, and the clock takes it on with honor, never erring in its task to present a chime directly on the hour.

To Sally Dedmore, however, the ticking sound of the grandfather clock had worked its way into her nightmares. The constant *tick, tick, tick* as she slaved away at the chores of the house was unrelenting, forcing her to work herself raw and rarely allowing her to spend even a single precious moment with her father.

That same grandfather clock chimed five times just as Sally was scrubbing away at a stubborn spot on the floor, her hands and knees pressed against the creaky wooden floorboards of her father's old house. Water and suds soaked her arms and all the way up her sleeves to her shoulders, and a heavy smear of dirt ran across her nose, unbeknownst to her.

She continued to scrub at the black spot on the floorboard, becoming increasingly frustrated at it. After an entire day of labor and

chores, taking care of all of the matters of the house, this was just the straw that broke the camel's back.

Weary, resigned, and drained, she sat back on her heels and laid the rag she was using down on the ground, washing her hands off in a bucket of clean water off to her side before reaching up and tucking her hair behind her ears. She took a moment just to breathe, knowing well that if she didn't clean the spots from the floors, nobody would.

She laid back into the spot with gusto, scrubbing at it and occasionally pouring more sudsy water onto the floor. Just as she finally got that spot completely clean, however, she heard a loud, guttural coughing sound from the room across the hallway. It sounded like the prelude to a choking fit, and Sally immediately stood up and rushed over toward the room, worried that something horrible might be happening.

Upon entering the other room, her eyes fell upon her frail, bedridden father. His eyes, though closed, were sunken into his skull, and his features were dreary and drab. The illness that had taken him had wreaked havoc on his body, and although it was obvious that he

used to be strong and capable, he now didn't have even the strength to bring himself to stand.

Sally stopped in his doorway, her hand on her chest and a worried expression on her face, as he coughed and wretched and fought with his own body to collect himself.

Eventually, although it was a struggle, he won out, and the coughing fit ceased. He calmed himself down and shuddered, but opened his eyes and met his daughter's gaze.

"I'm sorry, Sally. I'm all right," he began, shaking his head slightly, to which Sally shook her own and began bustling around his room, doing everything to make sure that he was all right.

"You never need to apologize to me, Dad. You know I'll take care of you," she said softly, fluffing the pillow behind his head before she walked off toward his dresser and picked up the pitcher of water and glass that sat there. She poured him a glass and turned back around, holding it very lightly to his lips so that he could drink from it.

He did drink, slowly, and upon nodding, she pulled the cup away from him.

“You should be off finding your own family, Sally. Not here taking care of your ailing dad. You are young and beautiful,” he said, chuckling softly which led into another, albeit weaker, coughing fit.

Sally walked over and knelt down at his bedside, taking his hand and holding it gently as the fit slowly ceased and he settled back down into his sheets.

“I’m where I’m supposed to be, Daddy,” she said gently, smiling sadly and meeting his weathered blue eyes with her gorgeous young ones, where they once looked exactly the same.

Her father frowned and was obviously not satisfied with her answer, but he’d used his strength for the day. After only a couple more moments, his eyes began to droop, and Sally sighed in relief once he began to snore lightly.

She was happy when he slept, because the body healed the most

when it was in rest.

She walked around the room for a few moments, dusting the shelves and tidying everything up before she walked back out into the den, crossing her arms at the bucket of water and rag that still sat on the floor.

She steeled herself, however, and fell back to the chore of cleaning the floor. It was tough and grueling work, but she knew that it had to be done.

Sally was quite young, as her father had pointed out, having only just celebrated her twentieth birthday. Her bones and joints, however, didn't feel like those of a twenty-year-old. The countless hours bent over taking care of the chores for the house, or the even *more* countless hours plucking away at stitches, making what little money she could to support her and her father, had weathered her bones and reduced her to the frailty of an older woman.

After another moment, Sally chuckled to herself, thinking about her father's comment about her heading out to build a family of her

own. It was ironic, in a way: she couldn't ever picture herself actually *having* her own family, in part because she was here caring for this one she was already a part of. She never had the time to go out and meet any suitors, and even her time with friends was becoming less and less frequent.

That, on top of her countless responsibilities around the house, would never let her find a family of her own. In her books, however… In her books, Sally could live any life she wanted.

Once her father had taken ill, and Sally had begun to spend more and more time at home to take care of him, she'd taken up reading as a way to spend the few precious moments she got to herself. And those few minutes alone truly *had* become precious to her, because reading was the way she could escape. Reading was the way that she *could* have a family of her own.

It was a beautiful, gorgeous fantasy, where at any moment, someone could swoop into her life and sweep her off her feet. They could erase all of her problems, make her feel whole again, and carry her away to a beautiful place where she could spend the rest of her

days in peaceful relaxation.

Sally shook her head, though, to clear her head of such thoughts, and went back to scrubbing away at the floor.

No matter how much she wanted something like that, and no matter how much she prayed for it, she knew that it would never happen. That kind of thing only happened in her books and was the stuff of fantasy. Her life, however unfortunate, was condemned to the realm of reality...

Chapter 1

Riverwood, Montana

August 9th, 1897

"Do you have everything you need?"

Sally's father sat upright in his bed for the first time in days, and his color was looking better than it had in weeks. This had, somewhat unconsciously, lifted Sally's mood considerably, and she had to bite back a smile as her father fussed about her.

"Remember to put your bonnet on before leaving. It must be so hot and dusty out there," he said, his voice soft but stronger than it had been in quite a while.

"Yes, Daddy, I know. I'll remember to grab my bonnet," she said, laughing lightly and pressing a light kiss to his brow. He lifted his arms, which trembled slightly, and wrapped them around her, sighing as she did the same.

“How is the wagon riding these days? I promise I’ll get around to fixing that old spoke soon, I know it’s probably a bumpy ride,” he said, pulling away from her and meeting her eyes with an expression of hopefulness for the first time in a very long while.

She hesitated, then, and turned toward his dresser to fetch him a glass of water so she could hide her face from him.

She couldn’t tell him that it had been nearly two years since he’d gotten out of bed. Even if somewhere deep down, he probably knew that it had been such a long time… she couldn’t be the one to tell him.

Telling him would make it *real,* and if he hadn’t even been able to admit to himself yet that it had been that long… She didn’t know if he could handle it if she had been the one to tell him.

“It rides well enough, Dad. Don’t worry about the spoke, it’s not too bad.”

She couldn’t tell him that it had been months since the wagon

had finally broken down and that she walked into town now. Telling him that would no doubt just worry him, and she didn't want to put any additional stress onto his shoulders.

"Well… If you say so," he said, chuckling softly.

Sally turned around and set the glass of water down on his bedside table before she pressed a kiss to his cheek, and said, "I'll be back in a couple of hours. Don't throw a party while I'm gone."

"It'll be the biggest in town," her father replied, a gleaming smile on his face as she pulled away. "Be safe now, dear. Come straight back home."

"I will, Dad. I'll bring lunch and chocolate."

Sally walked out toward her room and strapped her bonnet to her head, picking up her bag and tucking what little money she had into the inside pocket. It wasn't much, but it was enough for their groceries for the week, and she'd be making a good amount that week when she sold the blanket she was making for Ms. Portia.

As she opened the front door and walked out into the yard, she tried her best not to think about the state of the outside of the house. The wagon hadn't been the only thing to break down while her father had been bedridden; the second step up to the front porch was loose, the house needed to be repainted, the fences had several pickets missing, and the entirety of the barn needed to be reorganized.

Sally instead decided to look at the good of it all. It was still a *beautiful* house, even if it needed a few days' worth of work, because her father had poured his heart and soul into the property when he'd been younger. He'd built the house up from scratch and had forged it into a home.

Eventually, Sally made her way off of the land and onto the gravel road that led into the town. It was only a twenty-minute walk into the town, which was why she didn't mind it much. She actually quite enjoyed the little bit of exercise, and it was a break from the chores of the house.

She thought about all of the things that she needed to get,

though it was quite a small list: just enough food for her and her father to get by, which wasn't much considering his frailty and her small appetite.

That was good, at least. She didn't have the money to get much more than that.

Once she had her shopping list picked out, Sally's mind eventually drifted to what she needed to do when she got home. She'd already finished up with the floors, but she still needed to cook food for her father, and then she needed to do the laundry. Maybe after that, in the dying light of the day, she could get a bit of reading time in.

She smiled a bit and looked down to the small book in her bag, eager to get back to the beautiful story she'd picked up for only a couple of pennies the last time she'd been in town.

She didn't get to treat herself very often, so a cheap book was a very treasured find whenever she came across one.

Sally was so lost in thought that she almost didn't notice the sound of hoofbeats on the road behind her. Without even looking back, she moved off of the road, lifting up her skirt so that it wouldn't trail through the green grass and become stained.

As she did so, however, she noticed that there were more horses up ahead on the road. Sally figured that someone must have gotten separated from their party, and moved a bit further off of the road, but became increasingly confused as she studied the men that were drawing nearer to her with each passing second.

She became a bit frightened when she noticed that they had their weapons visibly drawn; large Sharps rifles that she recognized from hunting stores from around the area.

Sally turned around then to check what the people behind her looked like, and found two similarly-clad men on horseback approaching her quickly. Her heart leapt into her throat, and she lifted her skirt and began to run quickly away from the road, across the field that separated her from the town. It was then that she heard a brief shout from one of the men on the road, signaling one of his

compatriots, and another one of them broke out in chase after her.

She'd heard plenty of horror stories about young women being caught on the road and sold into terrible situations, or even worse, kept by the kidnappers. Sally's entire life flashed before her eyes at that moment, and she thought about what would happen to her if they caught her.

She thought about her father, and what would happen to him if she was taken. She let her skirt fall and ran as hard and as fast as she could, disregarding any stains that would form at the hem as she tried to get away from these strange men. In the end, however, it was futile.

It took only a few brief moments for the man on horseback to catch her, and she felt something hard and solid collide with the back of her head.

The last thing she saw was the ground approaching her as she fell, and then everything faded to black.

Chapter 2

Weldstone, Idaho

August 9th, 1897

Creak. Creak. Creak.

The sound of a poorly-oiled wheelbarrow echoed across the quiet expanse of farmland early in the morning, and the equally sad moos of a baby calf followed suit.

A white towel laid draped across the top of the wheelbarrow, protecting the baby animal from the harsh morning sun, but its small hooves could be seen sticking out from one side of it. A spot of blood was also growing slowly across the fabric, but the animal's sad moos were enough to keep the man pushing the wheelbarrow at pace.

That man was one of strong build and quiet nature, and his face showed the tiredness he felt from his night away from home. Across his shoulder hung the body of a dead coyote, which was presumably the origin of the wound gracing the baby calf he'd decided to collect

and protect.

His right forearm was also hastily wrapped in a strip of the same white cloth that covered the calf, though it had mostly bled through. If one were to check underneath it, they'd find two puncture wounds that looked like they belonged to the teeth of the animal hanging over his shoulder.

"Cash!"

The man looked up, and found he was closer to home than he had realized. An older woman stood with her arms crossed on his front porch, a look of utter frustration on her face.

On his face, however, was just a tired smile and eyes filled with relief.

"Hold your horses, Helena. I'm all right," he called out, continuing toward the house. She just shook her head and met his gaze. She was a strong-willed woman who was able to actually tolerate his odd habits and solitary life. She was his housekeeper in

name only, as she considered him to be her little brother rather than her friend and employer, and the house, one could say, belonged as much to her as it did to Cash. She had been by his side through thick and thin and deep down, Cash would always be more than grateful for her constant presence in his life.

"I can't 'hold my horses' when you come home early in the morning after being gone all night. And you've got a dead coyote over your shoulder, too," she said. He simply continued forward and pulled the sheet off of the wheelbarrow, exposing the calf to the light of the sun once again.

It let out a sad moo, and Helena lightly picked up the poor animal and held it gently in her arms.

"Someone had to get that coyote that's been terrorizing these parts. I'm happy it stumbled onto my land before it could hurt anything worse than farm animals," Cash replied, moving the wheelbarrow back off the side of the house where it sat until it was used for the farm every morning.

Helena just let out a few *tsks* in his direction and mumbled something about the bad luck of killing coyotes that he couldn't quite hear.

"I thought your days of being a hero were over, Mister Retired Sheriff," she said, looking back over toward him and shaking her head with a hint of disappointment in her words. She worried for him, and it showed, but he wasn't going to stop being himself just because he'd retired.

"I wasn't being a hero, Helena. Was just taking care of a problem," he said, tossing the coyote carcass onto the ground beside the house with the intention of tanning the coat. Before that, however, he had to clean and dress the calf's wounds.

He made his way toward the well on his property, pulling up a full pail of water before walking back over toward the house, smiling warmly at the small animal, and petting it very gently on the head.

He was kind, and warm, and loving, which was a stark surprise considering his size.

“And when are you going to stop bringing back every injured animal and stray you find? You’ve got quite a few scarred animals already that you take care of,” Helena said, though there was an easy smile on her face as the small cow leaned into the man’s gentle touch.

“It’s not as bad as all that,” he replied quietly, before taking the calf from her arms and walking through the front door into his house, intent on treating the baby and making sure it healed all right.

It was true: he did tend to take in any injured or lost animal he found. But he’d never want any of them to die or live a hard life, when he could’ve given them a nice home to live in.

Besides, it had been quite a while since he’d brought a stray home.

His house wasn’t exactly large, but it wasn’t anything like some of the smaller homesteads a short couple of miles away. It was spacious enough to be cozy, and there were enough rooms for one of them to have been fashioned into a makeshift infirmary for his strays.

Cash made his way over toward said room and closed the heavy oak door behind himself, taking a moment to survey it before he laid the young calf on the table that served as his operating station.

“There, there, little guy. Everything’s gonna be all right,” he whispered soothingly, stroking the calf’s fur gently as it mooed sadly. Cash pulled out a small sewing kit that he’d outfitted for sutures and laid it open on the table, picking up the needle and thread he’d held a thousand times and tying off the first knot.

This was always the hardest part, but he would always do his best to make sure that everyone turned out all right.

Chapter 3

Weldstone, Idaho

August 10th, 1897

Sally's consciousness returned to her very, very slowly, and it didn't do so without a fight. Her head pounded as the blackness of unconsciousness was replaced with a blinding, bright white light, and it took a couple of moments for her to fully come to grips with reality.

When she did, however, she almost wished that she hadn't.

The last thing she could remember was… *Running*? *But running from what…? Oh yes, men*. Men on horseback had chased her down, and then… Well, she didn't know anything after that. She supposed she'd been knocked out or something along those lines, but everything after seeing the men on horseback was… fuzzy.

She blinked rapidly, clearing the dust from her eyes, before taking in herself and her surroundings.

She was in the back of an uncovered wagon, and she could already feel the sunburns searing her skin. Men rode on horseback on either side, behind, and in front of her, judging by the sound of the hooves on the road. All of the men were talking lowly among themselves, and she realized only then that she was completely trussed up with rope. It was nearly a hog-tie, and she couldn't move any section of her body.

She had no idea how long she'd been unconscious, but considering how full her bladder was, and how empty her stomach felt, she knew it had been quite a while.

Sally didn't recognize any of the scenery they were passing, and she didn't even recognize the type of tree on the horizon. A knot of fear began to grow in her stomach, and all of the horror stories of the things that had happened to young women came flooding back to her.

She noticed a homestead not too far away from the road, and knew it was probably the only one for miles. She didn't think that any of the men had noticed she was awake yet, and so she inhaled a huge

breath in preparation to scream.

She didn't get the chance to, however. Just as she was about to let the scream out, one of the men on horseback to the side of the cart leaned over and shoved something into her mouth. It was damp and tasted foul as it pressed against her tongue, and she immediately gagged when she realized it was a worn, sweaty sock. She would have vomited had there been any food in her stomach.

"That was too close of a call, and it's exactly what I said was going to happen," the man who had shoved the sock into her mouth spoke, his voice low and nasally. "We should knock her out again, first of all, and second we should gag her while she's out."

Sally struggled against her bounds, unable to spit the sock out, and she couldn't pull it out with her hands because they were bound. Tears welled up at the corners of her eyes, and she shook her head rapidly as they spoke about her fate.

The man on the other side of the wagon stared toward her contemplatively, and eventually, he spoke in a low, gravelly tone.

“I don’t want to hit her unless we have to. Hitting women isn’t in the book of things I like to do,” he said, shaking his head and meeting her eyes with a very slightly sympathetic expression.

“You know very well that the payout for her will be well worth any corrupted morals we find along the way,” the first man said, chortling to himself with a laugh that made her feel sick.

The four men spoke among themselves for another minute or so, and there was general dissension regarding hitting her again, but they all agreed that she needed to remain quiet.

The one who had defended her to begin with looked toward her, and eventually said, “If you stay quiet, I’ll take that sock out of your mouth.”

She nodded quickly, the tears already rolling down her face, and the man reached out and pulled the sock out of her mouth.

“Please. Please let me go. I—I have to go and tend to my father.

He's very sick. Please," she pleaded, hiccupping as she spoke and looked between the four of them. "I—I can't leave him alone, he needs me to take care of him."

The man looked toward her sympathetically, but he eventually shook his head. "I'm sorry, miss. I can't do that. I'm sorry about your head; I didn't want to have to hit you like that."

"I… don't remember much," Sally eventually said, tears streaming down her face as she wriggled futilely against her restraints.

The man looked troubled for a couple of seconds after she said that, like he was genuinely worried about her, which was ironic given her current situation. Eventually, though, he shrugged his shoulders, and said, "You won't be needing to remember much where you're going."

Sally looked up at him in alarm, before she struggled a bit more against her restraints. The expertly tied ropes, however, didn't budge in the slightest. Her hopes began to dwindle, and several more tears began to form at the corners of her eyes.

“What do you mean? Where am I going? Please, you can just let me go. I’ll figure out how to get home. I won’t tell anyone, I swear.”

The man looked at her with apprehension, shaking his head quickly after that.

“Sorry, missy, but there’s no way I can trust you on that. I’ve been around this kind of dealing before, and no matter what people say, they always go to the sheriff if they get away.”

“But I won’t! I promise! Please, my father needs me, I don’t have time to talk to the police or do anything like that!” she pleaded, trying to keep her voice low so that the men knew she was good at following instructions.

“Don’t fall for the words of a snake, Michael,” the man at the front said, turning around to look back at them. “First glimpse of freedom she sees and she’s heading to the hills to find the nearest sheriff. It’s better we get her sold right and proper and clean our hands of this first.”

Sally looked around at the four of them, her hope fading by the second. “Sold? What do you mean, sold? Who do you intend to sell me to?”

The man she’d been talking to, who was apparently named Michael, looked up toward the man in the front in annoyance before turning back toward her. “We’ll be selling you off to a brothel. You’ll become a prostitute.”

Sally’s heart sank in her chest, and she shrunk in on herself as the men began to speak about this at length. She heard things like “lucky bastards” and “good payout” and “break her quick”, but she was too terrified and heartbroken to listen in on the rest of the conversation.

She eventually decided on something: she wasn’t going to go without a fight. Even if that meant her getting knocked out again, she had to risk it; she had to believe that somebody on that homestead down there would come to her rescue, and if it didn’t work…

She'd fight it until the end.

And so, she inhaled through her nose this time, and let out a loud, petrifying scream.

She thought she'd died in the moment after that, because a gunshot went off. She said her prayers to the Lord and asked him to look after father before she realized that she didn't feel any pain in her body, and immediate confusion by the men around her led her to believe that they hadn't shot her.

She didn't have long to think about how she'd actually survived, however, because as the horses began to whinny in fear, the wagon was jolted back and forth across the road. Sally was jostled in her restraints and the back of her head collided against the wooden crossbeam of the wagon.

It was already hurt by her injury from before, so it didn't take much more than that bump for her to slip out of consciousness once again.

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the end!

A Message from Rita Wethers

Another story has reached its end. Here's to many more to come!

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With Gratitude, Rita

About Rita Wethers

Rita Wethers grew up in Montana, USA with her family and her younger sister. She has always been an adventurous kid growing up and she would always get herself and her sister in trouble.

When she grew older, she decided to study PH Interdisciplinary Social Science& Secondary Education at the University of Montana Western.

However, Rita had a passion she kept secret from everyone besides her sister, Emily, and that was writing. At first, she published her own novels but slowly her career took off.

During a trip in Sweden she met the love of her life, Oscar.

After living in Oslo for two years they moved together in Montana to raise their children in the same place where Rita had such a wonderful childhood.

When she is not working on her writing, Rita likes to travel with her husband and her children, spend time with them, do arts and crafts with her younger daughter and ,of course, read her favorite romance novels!

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